The New Criterion

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A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

But if the artist fail? *by Samuel Lipman,* 1

On Philip Larkin *essays by Donald Hall, Robert Richman, & X. J. Kennedy,* 10

Gaston Gallimard *by Frederick Brown,* 18

Wallace Stevens *by Bruce Bawer,* 26

New poems *by Leslie Norris, Curtis Harnack, & Herbert Morris,* 35

Art: Houses, fields, gardens, hills *by Jed Perl,* 43; **Theater:** Winter journey *by Mimi Kramer,* 50; **Dance:** The trouble with Robbins *by David Daniel,* 55 **Books:** *René Wellek* English criticism 1900-1950 & American criticism 1900-1950 *reviewed by James W. Tuttleton,* 64; *Gail Levin* Hopper's places *reviewed by James R. Mellow,* 69; *Carlos Fuentes* The old gringo *reviewed by Mark Falcoff,* 71; *Robert Boyers* Atrocity and amnesia *reviewed by David Pryce-Jones,* 74; **Notebook:** The avant-garde comes to Hofstra *by Roger Kimball,* 78; **Letters,** 85

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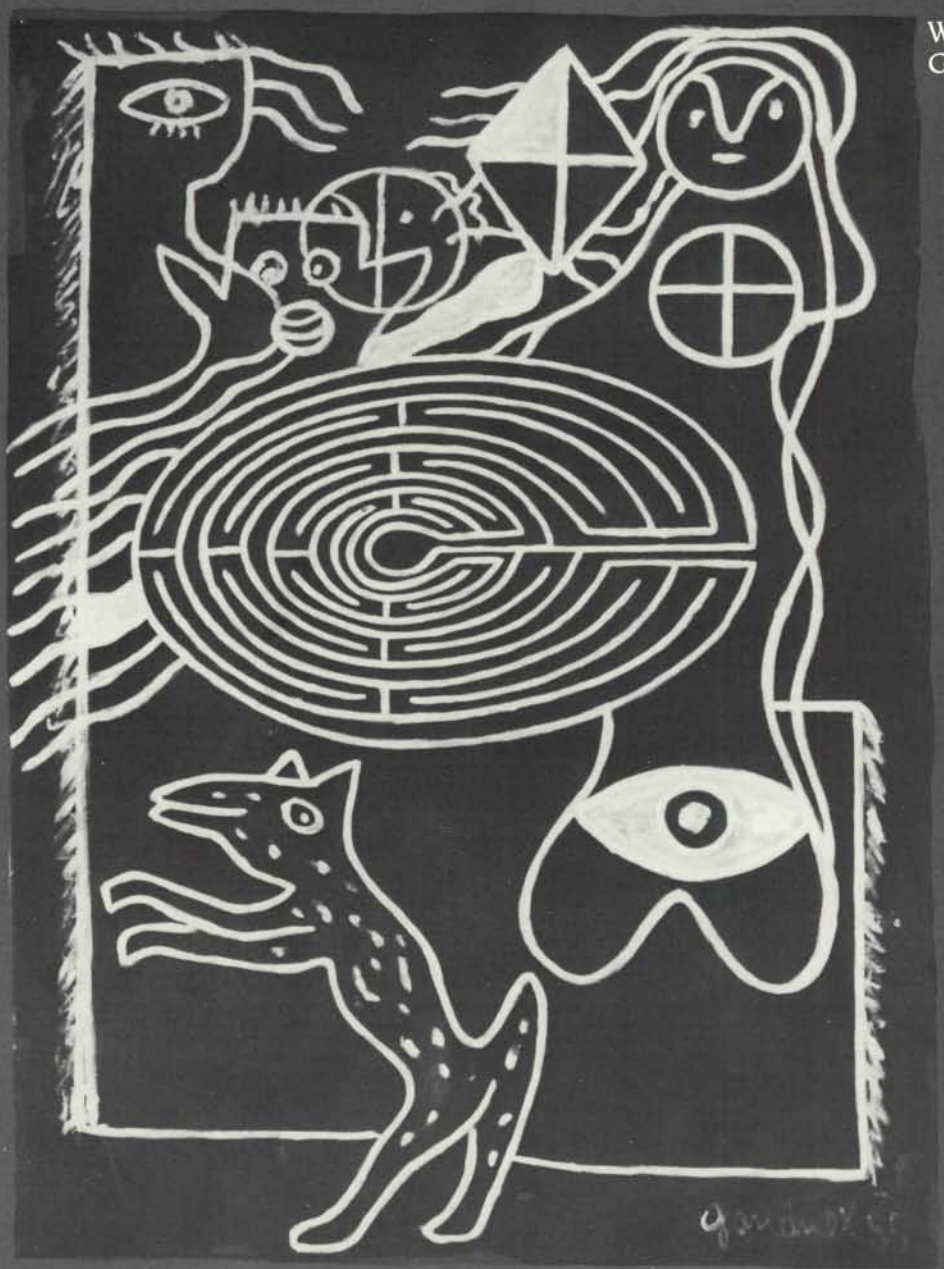

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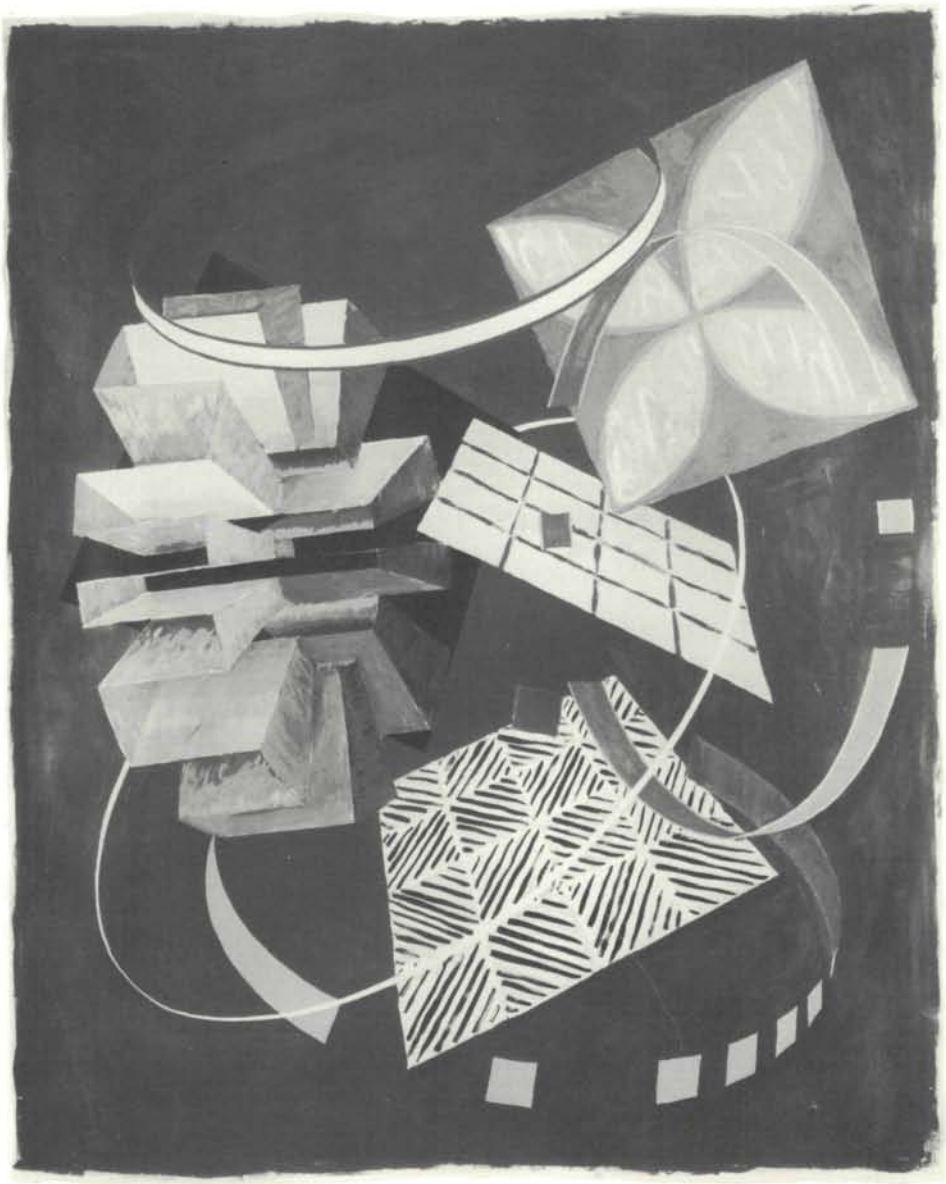

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Mimi Kramer is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion.*

James R. Mellow's most recent book is *Invented Lives: F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald.*

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But if the artist fail?

by Samuel Lipman

It may be taken as a rule that the public, able to judge only from outward signs, knows little about the inner lives of artists. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of the great musicians. Here, in conceiving its heroes, the public mixes a weak perception of biographical reality with a strong dose of bathetic sentimentality. Thus, for the nineteenth century, Beethoven's storming of the heavens was produced by, and was a triumph over, deafness; Schubert's flood of melody was so inextricably linked with his having died at an early age as to seem by some happy miracle its inevitable outcome; Chopin's wistful harmonies and poignant climaxes could only have been produced by a weakened consumptive. Perhaps most striking in this litany of satisfyingly maudlin outcomes was the image of Mozart's purity mocked—but also made ever more pure—by his failure to earn even a modest living from his divine music.

In our now almost bygone century, while the scale on which great musicians work has been seen to change, the sentimentality has remained. As the stage and film triumph of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* makes clear, Mozart, now portrayed as a loudmouthed, childlike genius, remains fair game for the spinning of psychological romances. Moving on to more recent art, we treat the powerful emotional effect of Mahler's music as the ineluctable manifestation of a life in which he was doomed to be a success as a conductor but a failure as a composer. Schoenberg's greatness—indeed the very survival of his music at the present time—is seen as the moral rather than the musical result of his refusal to write the lush and passionate compositions for which he had an undeniable talent. Bartok's music is made vastly more accessible by the memory of his poverty-ridden death from leukemia in an uncomprehending wartime America. Webern's brief and often uncommunicative works gain in meaning from the fact of his innocent death at the hands of an American soldier just after the end of World War II. Shostakovich's greatness is made even greater by his political tribulations in Stalinist and post-Stalinist Russia.

It will not have escaped the reader that all these easy conflations of historical fact and musical reality, despite the real sufferings they recount, belong to that hoary literary genre known as the artistic success story. For the devotees of this brand of melodrama, an artist can only be at his greatest when his greatness rises on the ashes of suffering, and the survival of the artist's *oeuvre,* to be rightly honored, must be grounded in that suffering. Though in all these cases the extent of the misfortune may be debatable, the success must be real: the consideration of such painful cases would hardly occur were it not for the victories which have brought them to our attention. And so, because the suffering of the artist becomes merely a cog in the wheel of success, the inner life which produces and embodies the

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suffering becomes a matter of no importance, a demonstration of necessary sacrifice and perhaps even of necessary psychopathology.

What has been true for the public image of the great creators of the past remains true for today's musicians as well. Now that the public seems to have decided that the age of the great primary creators of music is over, the popular idea of musicians has changed. Recent books about successful living musicians, for example, are almost always about performers, not composers. Whether these books deal with great careers or the trials and tribulations of the hopeful, the note struck is not one of triumph rooted in tragedy, or even of triumph and tragedy separately. Instead, the books tell of essentially limited artistic achievements rewarded, if at all, by the normal satisfactions of daily life. On a deeper level, moreover, these books are about outward events distantly observed. Whether the artist thinks great thoughts, or whether he thinks at all, we are not told; all we know is that he is providentially there to be written about.

Three examples of such books, appearing in recent years, display this trend of making the artist just like you and me, only more so. Not surprisingly, they have their origins in *New Yorker* profiles, and are nicely within the tradition of that magazine's long-time department, "Onward and Upward with the Arts." All three are written by *New Yorker* editor and contributor Helen Drees Ruttencutter. The first, *Pianist's Progress* (1979), attempts to be a heartwarming and frequently bittersweet chronicle of the career strivings of Robin McCabe, a young pianist who had attended the Juilliard School; the second, *Quartet* (1980), is a rather more unrelievedly optimistic account of the Guarneri Quartet, one of today's most prosperous American string quartets; the third, *Previn* (1985), is a short life-and-times of André Previn, the new Music Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

The opening section of the second chapter of *Pianist's Progress* captures well the tone of this very modern attitude toward the artist, an attitude which manages to find good in all things, even in the bad:

> I first became interested in the problems of student pianists, and how they go about trying for a career, in the fall of 1973, when I met Robin McCabe, one of Juilliard's two hundred. Juilliard has no dormitory facilities, and a pupil from out of town either pairs up with another student to rent an apartment or lives in a residential hotel or takes a room with kitchen privileges in a private apartment—preferably somewhere in the vicinity of Juilliard. Robin and another Juilliard pianist, Richard Fields, each rented a room in the duplex apartment of Jane Harris, a pianist friend of mine who lived off Central Park West two blocks north of the school. I lived in the same building, and sometimes caught glimpses of Robin—usually on the run . . . . I rarely saw Richard . . . . Richard was a shy young man, and a talented pianist. A pre-school [?] student at the New England Conservatory, in Boston, where he grew up, he'd come to Juilliard fresh from high school—he was younger than Robin—and he was unhappy with his teacher, who overwhelmed him in general and verbally scalded him when he did not live up to her expectations. Richard frequently slept half the day away in escape from the trauma awaiting him at school.
>
> Robin and Richard used the upstairs door of Jane's apartment, and sometimes when I was there Robin would come downstairs to tell us something funny that had happened at school or talk about a concert she was going to give . . . .

As *Pianist's Progress*—a weighty title, perhaps, for so unassuming a book—goes on to describe what the book's dust jacket calls the "rigors and joys of study, practice, and performance," it becomes clear that we are being presented with not great artistic events and accomplishments but only halting personal steps and outcomes. The author's conclusion, as she discusses Robin McCabe's decision to move permanently from her birthplace in Puyallup, Washington, to New York City, makes clear that

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neither the book nor the life it describes has in any large allegorical sense been a progress; rather it has been an increasing accommodation of art to personal emotion:

> I asked Robin whether—now that she had her final degree—she still wanted to live in the Northwest and teach, and have Barrett [Herbert Barrett, a New York concert manager] book concerts for her from there. She thought for a minute, and then she said, "This past year has made me realize that my center of gravity is here. This is where I belong, where I ought to be. To put it more accurately, this is where I *want* to be."

By contrast, Mrs. Ruttencutter's book on the Guarneri Quartet deals not with a struggling young pianist but with a busy chamber music ensemble, a group which she begins her book by describing, perhaps not quite accurately, as "the preeminent string quartet in the world today." The group is seen rehearsing, travelling, playing, and, above all, succeeding. The success is limited musically by the sad fact that the music the quartet plays—no matter how well it plays—is music which has been played innumerable times in the past by historically significant ensembles, and is today played all over the world by groups more or less equal to the Guarneri in skill and earning power. But this is all grist to Mrs. Ruttencutter's *New Yorker* approach of finding everything wonderful even when—or precisely because—it isn't great. And so the book ends on the highest note the author can manage, a description of a Guarneri concert at the White House during the Carter administration. But it is an apotheosis of the media, not of the spirit:

> Even in their dark suits—the required dress for the evening—Beall [the group's manager] would have seen them as "four handsome devils," and they played with tremendous energy and excitement the lushly beautiful quartet [Dvořák's "American" Quartet], which gives all of them, a number of times, showcase solos that display their great talent and the beauty of the instruments they play. The audience gauchely and wonderfully applauded between movements. Most American audiences, no matter how good a concert is, seem reluctant to show their pleasure. If people stand, chances are it's a prelude to a fast exit. This night, when the quartet finished, the audience leaped to its feet and applauded thunderously. The President, precluding an encore—it had been a long night—stood and shook hands with each man. Then he turned to [Menachem] Begin and the audience and, with a broad smile, said, "Aren't they the greatest?"

Mrs. Ruttencutter's new book on André Previn is yet another study in the trivial worship of art and the artist. For her, everything about her hero is the greatest; but greatest means fame and success, not the majesty of a life in art. Nowhere is this more clear than in her description of Previn in a chamber music rehearsal at Tanglewood with three principal players of the Boston Symphony:

> At two on Friday afternoon, Previn rehearsed the Mozart piano quartet with [the violinist] Silverstein, the cellist Jules Eskin, and the violist Burton Fine in the Shed. It was their second, and final, rehearsal. The first one had amused Previn. He told me, "I was prepared to really dig in, but we just played through it, and then Joey [Silverstein] said, 'Now let's tell jokes.' Well, they work so hard up there, and they're so good . . . ."
>
> On Friday afternoon, when they'd finished the first movement, Previn turned his part back to page 1, in anticipation of working out certain spots, but the others seemed eager to get on with it. When they had finished the last movement, Previn went backstage with Silverstein, and while Silverstein was wiping the rosin off his violin and carefully tucking it into its case they discussed what they might play next summer. Silverstein said, "How about one of the Brahms trios?" and Previn said fine, he liked all of them. Maybe the B Major. Silverstein nodded.

In a similar vein of good feeling, we have been provided in recent years with a spate

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of books by great and near-great singers, the overwhelming majority of which tell us of what we ought to think it feels like to live the life of career triumph. A noxious example of this particular kind of foolishness is *Full Circle* (1982), Dame Janet Baker's putative diary of the last months of her operatic career. No better and no worse than what has come from her colleagues, these diary entries cover a broad range. There is the trivially descriptive:

> It's always the petty, silly irritations which mar a day. This morning began with post, the usual conglomeration of adoring letters, unwanted advice, and abuse. The latter I can tell just by the writing on the envelopes, and usually the first sentence confirms my suspicions; into the waste-paper basket they go! I slept very badly last night, never a good prelude to the following day. The telephone rang incessantly; I looked at the diary for the month of May which we have tried to keep as quiet as possible to give me a breather before Glyndebourne begins; it is an horrific sight, not from the number of engagements but from all the surrounding commitments to people who must positively be seen and attended to before we disappear to the seclusion (I hope!) of Sussex for six weeks.

And the trivially philosophical:

> My working years may be shorter than those of most people, but the fulfilment I have always felt will, I truly believe, remain with me in retirement, giving me a sort of 'permission' to enjoy the last part of my life to its utmost. Middle and old age are special times. They are Nature's way of preparing us for the last stages of our development. If things have gone as they should during the other stages of life, the final section is all set for the most important phase of all—the spritual [sic] one. It seems to me that the body does its best to release us for this phase by its own ageing.

The result of all this soft-minded self-indulgence is that we can make happy contemplation for ourselves out of the suffering and pleasures of others. Thus pleasured, we can conceive of the artist according to the new gospel of arts advocacy, as the only truly happy being, the explorer whose lucky fate it always is to find a fresh and excitingly stocked continent.

But as we all know from our own traversal of life, there is such a thing as failure without success, and it is failure, rather than success, which is the normal condition of man. What is true for humanity in general is doubly true for the struggling artist; for this aspiring creature, the unhappy ontological reality is that one fails in the first instance not because one's art is rejected but because one isn't an artist at all.

There are sadly few chroniclers of the desperation—quiet or otherwise—of the would-be artist. In literature, the English *fin-de-siècle* writer Max Beerbohm is a noble example of a writer who took the fate of even the failed artist seriously. Though often perceived as a mere aesthete, Beerbohm demonstrated—in "No. 2, The Pines," an account of the last years of the poet Swinburne and his keeper Watts-Dunton—a deep understanding of the living tomb which the last years of a great artist often are. And in "Enoch Soames," the classic story of an artist who sells his soul to the devil for nothing, Beerbohm described the life of an author whose failures are unredeemed by success or by any achievement, no matter how unappreciated. Significantly, Beerbohm's own reward for the comprehension he showed of the artistic predicament has been to have his literary achievement taken at face value—as merely an elegantly refined form of parody.

In the literary consideration of music, there is another remarkable though now little-discussed exception to this rule of sentimentally transmuting the dross of failure into the glory of art. That exception comes from Somerset Maugham, a writer whose very success with the reading public over more than the past half century is all too frequently taken as the sign of a deeper artistic failure. It could be said that one of Maugham's preoccupations as a writer was

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the artist—as success (in the case of El Greco), as ruin (the Gauguin-like Charles Stackpole in *The Moon and Sixpence*), or as the object of the manipulation of others (the aging Edward Driffield, modeled on Thomas Hardy, in *Cakes and Ale*).

Maugham's greatest—or at least most harrowing—account of the fate of a hopeful artist was contained in "The Alien Corn," a 1930 short story first printed in book form in *First Person Singular* (1931), and then made into a film in *Quartet* (1948). At first glance, "The Alien Corn" is a simple story about the scion of a rich and highly assimilated Anglo-Jewish family, a febrile young man who, much against his family's wishes, wants to be a concert pianist.

Speaking in the voice of Ashenden, his fictive *alter ego,* Maugham tells this simple story on two levels, the first social and the second personal. On the social level, Maugham describes in painful and pitiless detail the efforts of the Bland family, originally Bleikogel, to become, through adroit use of their immense fortune, an accepted English county family. Accomplishing this task is not easy: Sir Adolphus ("Freddy") and Lady Muriel, née Miriam, must hide in their racial closet not only the skeleton of the still living and tyrannical Dowager Lady Bland, who speaks with a German accent, but also that of Ferdinand Rabenstein, her dashing brother.

It is Rabenstein—"Ferdy" to family and friends alike—who provides the link between the old world of the Bleikogels and the new world of the Blands. He is a curious figure, on the one hand eager to play the role of a courtier in gentile high society, and on the other secretly proud, if not quite of his origins, then at least of himself. Vastly rich and highly cultured, he collects art and plays Viennese waltzes on the piano with the skill and suavity he displays in life. Clearly modeled by Maugham after the rich Jews of German origin newly acceptable at court in the reign of Edward VII (1901-1910), Rabenstein is welcomed everywhere, save by the younger Blands: to them he is an embarrassment because of his doubly foreign past.

On the personal level, "The Alien Corn" presents the doomed struggle of George Bland to be that which he is not—an artist. Young, handsome in a conventional English way, the heir to a great fortune, George cares not for the newly adopted life over which his parents have taken so much trouble. He has no desire to do as his father and mother wish: to be a country squire, to marry an English girl of good—i.e., gentile—stock, and some day to succeed to his father's title and his seat in Parliament. Ashenden treats the last point on this parvenu wish-list with wryness not untinged by cynicism:

> "Is George interested in politics?" I asked, to change the conversation.
>
> "Oh, I do hope so. After all, there's the family constituency waiting for him. It's a safe Conservative seat and one can't expect Freddy to go on with the grind of the House of Commons indefinitely."
>
> Muriel was grand. She talked already of the constituency as though twenty generations of Blands had sat for it.

What George does want is to be a pianist. He conceals this desire from his parents, telling them that he wants to go to Munich to learn German, when in fact he plans to study the piano there. Because he balks at coming home for the splendid party his parents wish to give on their estate to celebrate his coming of age, his parents learn the awful truth. When he does come back for the party, and good-naturedly endures the festivities, his parents hope that he has submitted to their plans for him.

But the senior Bland's optimism is dashed when George makes clear not only that he intends to return to Munich to continue piano studies but that he is willing to forsake even his parents' hard-won Englishness. Again, the narrator's cynicism, this time not excluding a certain genteel anti-Semitism, makes clear the gulf between parents and son:

> Freddy was peremptory. He forbade George to go back to Germany. George answered that

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he was twenty-one and his own master. He would go where he chose. Freddy swore he would not give him a penny.

"All right, I'll earn money."

"You! You've never done a stroke of work in your life. What do you expect to do to earn money?"

"Sell old clothes," grinned George.

There was a gasp from all of them. Muriel was so taken aback that she said a stupid thing.

"Like a Jew?"

"Well, aren't I a Jew? Aren't you a Jewess and isn't Daddy a Jew? We're all Jews, the whole gang of us, and everyone knows it and what the hell's the good of pretending we're not?"

Then a very dreadful thing happened. Freddy burst suddenly into tears. I'm afraid he didn't behave very much like Sir Adolphus Bland, Bart., M.P., and the good old English gentleman he so much wanted to be, but like an emotional Adolph Bleikogel who loved his son and wept with mortification because the great hopes he had set on him were brought to nothing and the ambition of his life was frustrated. He cried noisily with great loud sobs and pulled his beard and beat his breast and rocked to and fro. Then they all began to cry, old Lady Bland and Muriel, and Ferdy, who sniffed and blew his nose and wiped the tears streaming down his face, and even George cried. Of course it was very painful, but to our rough Anglo-Saxon temperament I am afraid it must seem also a trifle ridiculous.

At this point the Dowager Lady Bland intervenes to suggest a compromise: since clearly George should not throw away all the treasures the world counts important unless he has genius as an artist, he must agree—after two further years of study—to an independent evaluation by (in Ashenden's words) "some competent and disinterested person." If that person were to say that George "showed promise of becoming a first-rate pianist, then no further obstacles would be placed in his way." If not, then George would have to come home and take up the life his parents wanted for him.

George accepts Lady Bland's compromise and returns to Germany. Unvisited (at his own request) by his family, he lives the life of a student. When Ashenden, on a pretext, comes to Munich, he hears George play, and finds his playing peculiarly unsatisfactory:

He sweated profusely. At first I could not make out what was the matter with his playing, something did not seem to me quite right, and then it struck me that the two hands did not exactly synchronize, so that there was ever so slight an interval between the bass and the treble; but I repeat, I am ignorant of these things; what disconcerted me might have been merely the effect of his having drunk a good deal of beer that evening, or indeed only my fancy. I said all I could think of to praise him.

After the two years are up, George returns for the verdict, and it is Ferdy Rabenstein who now provides the means of the story's horrifying denouement. He brings the renowned concert pianist Lea Makart to the Blands for the purpose of judging George's future. The entire family (with Ashenden) assembles with her to listen, and the verdict is what they must have feared. For as Ashenden makes clear, despite all the attempts at accommodation to an essentially philistine world, every one of them—even Freddy and Muriel Bland—could recognize artistic distinction, or its absence:

He played Chopin. He played two waltzes that were familiar to me, a polonaise, and an *étude*. He played with a great deal of *brio*. I wish I knew music well enough to give an exact description of his playing. It had strength and a youthful exuberance, but I felt that he missed what to me is the peculiar charm of Chopin, the tenderness, the nervous melancholy, the wistful gaiety and the slightly faded romance that reminds me of an early Victorian keepsake. And again I had the vague sensation, so slight that it almost escaped me, that the two hands did not quite synchronize. I looked at Ferdy and saw him give his sister a look of faint surprise. Muriel's eyes were fixed on the pianist, but presently she dropped them and

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for the rest of the time stared at the floor. His father looked at him too, and his eyes were steadfast, but unless I was much mistaken he went pale and his face betrayed something like dismay. Music was in the blood of all of them, all their lives they had heard the greatest pianists in the world, and they judged with instinctive precision.

After this, Lea Makart's verdict does not come as a surprise. It is only a confirmation:

At last he stopped and turning round on his seat faced her. He did not speak.

"What is it you want me to tell you?" she asked.

They looked into one another's eyes.

"I want you to tell me whether I have any chance of becoming in time a pianist in the first rank."

"Not in a thousand years."

Now it is Maugham's turn, in the voice of Lea Makart, to speak to the vocation of the artist, to the role of money and power in art, and to the relationship between the artist and the world which makes his art possible:

"Ferdy has told me the circumstances," she said at last. "Don't think I'm influenced by them. Nothing of this is very important." She made a great sweeping gesture that took in the magnificent room with the beautiful things it contained and all of us. "If I thought you had in you the makings of an artist I shouldn't hesitate to beseech you to give up everything for art's sake. Art is the only thing that matters. In comparison with art, wealth and rank and power are not worth a row of pins." She gave us a look so sincere that it was void of insolence. "We are the only people who count. We give the world significance. You are only our raw material."

Perhaps to soften her presumption, Lea Makart plays for the group she so plainly sees as but one more audience among the many to whom she has presented her art. Her playing is exquisite, but the admiring Ashenden is not quite lost in its beauty:

With another part of me I watched the others and I saw how intensely they were conscious of the experience. They were rapt. I wished with all my heart that I could get from music the wonderful exaltation that possessed them. She stopped, a smile hovered on her lips, and she put on her rings. George gave a little chuckle.

"That clinches it, I fancy," he said.

What had "clinched it" for George Bland was for Lea Makart just another event in the crowded daily life of a great musician. As she and Ashenden drive back to London, all the talk is of career—her career—and not of the inner life, sometimes grand and sometimes tragic, of the artist:

. . . she told me of her early years in Manchester and of the struggle of her beginnings. She was very interesting. She never even mentioned George; the episode was of no consequence; it was finished and she thought of it no more.

For George, too, the matter was finished. "The Alien Corn" ends with a short, deadpan paragraph, perilously close to the superficiality of efficient journalism, describing a routine tragedy:

Perhaps because the shooting season was about to open he took it into his head to go into the gun-room. He began to clean the gun that his mother had given him on his twentieth birthday. No one had used it since he went to Germany. Suddenly the servants were startled by a report. When they went into the gun-room they found George lying on the floor shot through the heart. Apparently the gun had been loaded and George while playing about with it had accidentally shot himself. One reads of such accidents in the paper often.

One of the great strengths of "The Alien Corn" is its skillful interweaving of two themes, the social and the personal, the atmosphere of Jewish assimilation and the tragic fate of a young man who could not become the artist he wanted to be. But Maugham does more than tell a seamy and

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fairly trite story of social climbing and the desire to pass. He also suggests that in their desire to no longer be seen as Jews the Blands also have willingly given up the secular civilized culture which they, like Ferdy Rabenstein, had found as part of their birthright. Before the final crisis, this cultural renunciation seems already to have been made. Thus when George sits down at the piano to play a Chopin nocturne, just before the family council at which Lady Bland offers her compromise, his father expostulates: "Stop that noise, I won't have him play the piano in my house." But when the chips are down in George's moment of truth before Lea Makart, the Blands in fact turn out to need no professional advice; they know enough to know that their son will never be an artist—not because they don't want him to be, but because he lacks the gift.

And so, strangely enough, the Blands' deracination leads directly from the abandonment of their past, through the abandonment of their culture, to the final tragedy of their son's lonely failure. As penetrating as Maugham's description of the fate of the Blands as Jews is, the true subject of "The Alien Corn"—and the cause of the story's impact—is the lonely fate of the artist. This loneliness, and this fate, is of course a general matter, not confined to Jews, or to the rich, or indeed to the young. It is instead the normal destiny not only of the artist who fails to be an artist, but, eventually, of the artist who succeeds and then finds—as all artists must—that the permanence which he has sought is subject to his own mortality. In this respect, the fate of the fictional and ungifted George Bland is not so terribly different from that of the very real-life great musical artists who find themselves faced by the inevitable decline and destruction of their powers in what they must see as a kind of living death.

Here, it seems to me, is the reality of the inner life of the artist. This life is a constant—and constantly losing—battle to keep at bay, on one side, the permanent shortfall of physical and mental abilities in the context of the perfection which art strives to be, and on the other side, the inevitable arrival of silence and death. One can catch something of this dual struggle in the well-known words of Sergei Rachmaninoff, both a great composer and a great pianist, as he lay on his deathbed; "At my age one can't miss practice . . . My dear hands. Farewell, my poor hands. Farewell, my poor hands."

Just now, treated to the latest electronic marvels of small, portable cameras and digital recording, the musical public has been given a new and infinitely poignant account of the autumn years of a supremely great musical performer. *Vladimir Horowitz: The Last Romantic,* a film soon to be a compact disc, was shown to large audiences of the pianist's admirers in Carnegie Hall in the middle of November. Here, in shots of the eighty-one-year-old artist at home performing a varied program for his wife and talking with her and members of the technical crew about himself, his past, and music in general, one saw vividly (in de Gaulle's memorable phrase) the shipwreck that is old age.

From the moment of the film's opening—a shot of the pianist plainly worried, as he rode with his wife in a limousine, about his present capacities to play in public—to the end more than an hour later, when he finished a harried and smashed performance of the famous Chopin Polonaise in A flat major by turning to the camera and saying with an anxious grin, "Just like old days!" the viewer was conscious of greatness in irreversible decline. It is true that along the way the film presented musically breathtaking Horowitz performances of slow pieces by Bach-Busoni, Schubert, and Scriabin. And scattered among the more technically demanding works which he also played—and which he palpably failed to master as he once had—were moments, again in lyrical passages, of surpassing reflective beauty. But overall, whether in music or words, the mood was one of fatigue and weakness, of lessened powers and energy.

Through it all, Horowitz seemed conscious, indeed all too conscious, of what

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was happening to his body and his mind. Not only did he ask many times, in a child-like way, for compliments and reassurances on his playing from the film and recording personnel. Not only did he say time and time again how he knew all of music, and could play any piano piece. Not only did he repeatedly speak, like some modern-day Baron Charlus announcing the death of all his friends and his own survival, of colleagues of yesterday (among them Rachmaninoff and Toscanini) who had died, leaving only himself alive. Even more tellingly, he pointed out half sadly, half quizzically, "The world is sinking now . . . The world is not so good." And he made clear, by immediately playing the haunting Scriabin Étude in C sharp minor, opus 2, no. 1 (1887-89), that in perfectly re-creating a moment of Russian culture before the Revolution he was intoning a requiem for our own world, and for himself.

For many, of course, there may appear to be a way out of this gloomy situation. Despite the artist's own professionalism, he can always remain at heart an amateur, a lover of the art who finds a greater personal satisfaction in witnessing beauty than in struggling to create it. Indeed, the great Franz Schubert himself wrote a song, always a sentimental favorite of musical people the world over, which makes precisely this point. In *An die Musik* ("To Music"), the words of the poet Franz von Schober provided Schubert with an opportunity to capture, and even inspire, the mood of a century which took the deepest satisfactions from music:

Du holde Kunst, in wieviel grauen Stunden,
Wo mich des Lebens wilder Kreis umstrickt,
Hast du mein Herz zu warmer Lieb' entzunden,
Hast mich in eine bess're Welt entrückt,
Bess're Welt entrückt.

Oft hat ein Seufzer, deiner Harf' entflossen,
Ein süsser, heiliger Akkord von dir,
Den Himmel bess'rer Zeiten mir erschlossen,
Du holde Kunst, ich danke dir dafür,
Du holde Kunst, ich danke dir.

(You dear art, in how many gray hours,
When the wild commotion of life ensnared me,
You have fired my heart to warm love,
And carried me away to a better world.

Often a sigh, escaped from your harp,
A sweet holy chord from you,
Unlocked for me the heaven of better times,
You dear art, I thank you for this,
You dear art, I thank you.)

But lest one take undue comfort from these reassuring thoughts—and from the beautiful music which clothes them—there exists powerful evidence that, for those most deeply involved in the propagation of the music which *An die Musik* so emotionally celebrates, musical satisfactions are not enough, and the reality of music-making is hardly so reassuring. On the recording of Lotte Lehmann's Farewell Recital[1] in Town Hall in February of 1951, the great *Lieder* singer ended the concert (and her major performing career) with an encore expressing her gratitude to the blessed music which gave life to her being. The encore, of course, was *An die Musik,* sung with all the resonance of an almost half-century-long career on the German and Austrian lyric stage. The performance of the song is beautiful and infinitely touching—until the last repeated and final *Ich danke dir.* These three words Lotte Lehmann could not bring herself to sing, or even speak. Consumed by emotion, she left the stage. To listen to the record today is to find part of the true reality of a musical career, the part ignored by those who hanker after the stories of artistic beatification and failure redeemed after death, and by those who relish the trite success stories of the Pavarottis and their like that infest today's literary world of artist biographies. It would be a pity if the harsh interior reality artists face in their daily lives were forever to be ignored by those who, in reading about these artists, prefer enjoyment to understanding.

1 *Lotte Lehmann's Farewell Recital,* with Paul Ulanowsky, piano. Pelican LP 2009.

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Philip Larkin 1922-1985
by Donald Hall

Unless there is a cache of poems secreted somewhere in Hull, which we may doubt, the poet Philip Larkin died before the man. As far as I know, his last poem was "Aubade," published in the *Times Literary Supplement* almost a decade ago. It begins:

> I work all day, and get half drunk at night.
> Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
> In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
> Till then I see what's really always there:
> Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
> Making all thought impossible but how
> And where and when I shall myself die.

The fear of dying, daily companion of many, found its Homer, Dante, and Milton in Philip Larkin. His post-religious, almost Roman skepticism looks forward only to "total emptiness for ever,/The sure extinction that we travel to." As in his early "Church Going," his language acknowledges religious feeling without diluting skepticism, sentimentalizing loss, or asking for pity. Larkin is resolute, forthright, witty, and gloomy. This is the man who famously said that deprivation was for him what daffodils were for Wordsworth. Yet surely the results of this life, in the shape of his poems, are gifts, not deprivations.

The Less Deceived announced Philip Larkin in 1955. As a young man he had published *The North Ship,* poems lyrical and Yeatsian and not yet Larkinesque. The early work resembled other young Englishmen: neo-Romantic, even a bit *wet* . . . By the time I found him he had acquired Philip Larkin's voice. I heard him first on John Wain's BBC program, "New Soundings," in 1953—where I also first heard Kingsley Amis telling about *Lucky Jim.*

Larkin's quality was clear; it was also clear that something new was happening. Although *The Less Deceived* was a small-press book—published by George Hartley who ran the Marvell Press and edited *Listen,* the best literary magazine of its time—it was published with a list of subscribers which included almost all English poets under forty: Amis, Bergonzi, Boyars, Brownjohn, Conquest, Davie, Enright, Hamburger, Hill, Jennings, MacBeth, Murphy, Thwaite, Tomlinson, Wain. (Thom Gunn was in California; Ted Hughes was not yet Ted Hughes.) And there were dons: Bateson, Dobree, Dodsworth, Fraser, Kermode, Leishmann.

It was not long before Larkin became a popular poet in England, second only to Betjeman in public affection. When a good poet becomes popular there is always some silly reason as well as recognition of excellence. Dylan Thomas became a bestseller in this country—surely the obscurest poet ever to sell ten thousand copies—because tales of drunkenness and irreverence sold copies. With Robert Frost, the carefully cultivated rural manner—gussied up by the Luce publications until he resembled Scattergood Baines—sold copies and had little to do with the real man.

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With Larkin and his English readers, the silliness which helped to make him popular was his genuine, uncultivated, sincere philistinism. In his prose he wrote disparagingly of painters who put two noses on one face and sculptors who carved holes through bodies; he lectured us on the *ugliness* of modernism, most especially the three P's: Pound, Picasso, and (Charlie) Parker. In the United States the terrorists of modernism have frightened the semi-educated middle class into accepting anything that carries the Avant-garde Seal of Approval. In England the middle classes are not so gullible; many remain secure in the conviction that Picasso is a fake, and that good painters can be defined as the ones who make horses that look like horses. When he made an anthology, Larkin's *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* was a monument to modesty and amateurism: Sir John Squire and yards of doggerel. Doubtless it is the *worst* anthology of modern poetry, with the possible exception of Yeats's . . .

Larkin's poetry of course is another matter. There is nothing modest or amateur about "The Whitsun Weddings" or "Aubade." *The Less Deceived* was a superb volume, with three or four of Larkin's best poems and two dozen fine ones. Some are corny but splendidly achieved: "At Grass" is the best horse picture ever painted. Back in the mid-Fifties, the jocular and tough-minded "Toads" stood out. Gradually, the softer and more ruminative "Church Going" seems more to represent Larkin's best. In his second volume, *The Whitsun Weddings,* the title poem may be the finest moment in all his work. Characteristic in the place it is spoken from—a little to the side of life, watching, commenting—it is both empathetic and aloof, both superior and wistful. It ends:

> I thought of London spread out in the sun,
> Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:
>
> There we were aimed. And as we raced across
> Bright knots of rail
> Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
> Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
> Travelling coincidence; and what it held
> Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
> That being changed can give. We slowed again,
> And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
> A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
> Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

Look at the way sentences curl down the page. Who else among us has made such motions?

The answer, I think, is Robert Frost, but I do not suggest direct influence. If there is influence, Frost to Larkin, it comes by way of Edward Thomas, whom Frost instructed. Although Thomas Hardy is Larkin's master —the only earlier twentieth-century poet clearly superior (and Geoffrey Hill the only contemporary)—the comparison with Frost remains useful. Frost loved to play the English sentence across the English line, usually pausing to rhyme on the way, mimicking what he called "sentence sounds." These sentence sounds show themselves by phrase-pitch and perform a sophistication of syntax. At the end of "Mr. Bleaney," from *Whitsun Weddings,* we can see Larkin using the imitative gesture of syntax as well as Frost did it.

> But if he stood and watched the frigid wind
> Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed
> Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,
> And shivered, without shaking off the dread
>
> That how we live measures our own nature,
> And at his age having no more to show
> Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
> He warranted no better, I don't know.

This awkward, difficult-to-say sentence mimics the reluctance of the mind to reach conclusion about its own worth or lack of worth. The muscular gestures of its hesitation express, by form and mimickry of grammar, the state of mind that the language describes. In this coincidence of

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manner and matter is a good portion of Larkin's genius.

But not only here. In an interview Larkin spoke about his reputation as a melancholy man, and protested that he thought he was rather funny, actually. True enough: "Sexual intercourse began/In nineteen-sixty-three/(Which was rather late for me)—/Between the end of the *Chatterly* ban/And the Beatles' first LP." But something besides humor redeems the gloom of Philip Larkin. His poetry is beautiful, which gives us deep and abiding pleasure, however melancholy a paraphrase may be. At the end of "Aubade," Larkin makes a metaphor, appropriately sinister, in a gorgeous pentameter line:

> Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready
> to ring
> In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
> Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
> The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
> Work has to be done.
> Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

Doubtless the poem is ***deprived*** enough . . . but if you don't walk out of the theater humming the tune, you don't read poetry.

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"Trying to preserve something"

by Robert Richman

Of the many articles that have appeared in the newspapers on the sad occasion of Philip Larkin's death, at sixty-three, none dealt adequately with his poetry. The writers of these articles expressed admiration for Larkin's oeuvre, but more for its popularity than for its poetic qualities. Predictably, the poet's non-poetic characteristics were given the spotlight: his career as a librarian, his famous anti-social attitudes, and his "prickly, anti-cultural *persona,*" as an anonymous writer in the *Times* of London put it. "He never married," Ian Hamilton reminded us in the *Sunday Times,* "and for most of his life he lived alone, shuttling from his flat in Hull to the University where he served as the Librarian. It was a life that he enjoyed making no claims for . . . ." The daily *Times* also focused on the aspect of Larkin's life he "made no claims for" by reprinting a piece Larkin wrote in 1977 on his career as a librarian. Larkin's famous philistinism about modern art and literature was discussed at length. In *The Observer* Larkin's old friend Kingsley Amis recalled how the poet's "company brought a jovial reassurance, a sense that the fools and charlatans, the Pounds and Picassos and many of their living heirs were doomed by their own absurdity." The author of the *Times*'s obituary agreed: "In reality he was the last neo-Georgian." (This author also retailed Larkin's "eccentric" views on marriage and sexual relations.) The obituary in *The New York Times* for the most part consisted of a string of quotations from Larkin's poetry and prose on just these subjects.

It was to be expected, of course. Larkin himself spent the last years of his life conscientiously enhancing his reputation as an ordinary chap who hated children and modernity equally. In 1973, Larkin published his infamous *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse.* This fat anthology pretended for the most part that modern poetry did not exist, and earmarked its editor as an avowed enemy of modernism. Larkin's collection of critical prose, *Required Writing,* which appeared in 1983, was a virtual compendium of reactionary views on art, literature, and jazz. Larkin solidified his anti-modernist position by publishing, in 1985, an updated edition of his collection of jazz reviews, first brought out fifteen years ago, entitled *All What Jazz.* Then there were the interviews Larkin granted, after having refused to consent to one for so many years, to *The Observer* in 1979 and to *The Paris Review* in 1982. (Both are reprinted in *Required Writing.*) These confirm and elaborate not only Larkin's philistinism but his "eccentric" views on marriage, women, and social life. In a review of Henry de Montherlant's novel *The Girls,* Larkin reports that every page of the book has at least one choice nugget for a quote-a-day Misogynist's Calendar. In fact it is Larkin's interviews that are the best source for such a calendar. Marriage should be shunned, Larkin tells us, because it means "putting yourself at the

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disposal of someone else, ranking them higher than yourself." And: "there is a limit to what you can get from other people." In these interviews Larkin is so proudly devoid of illusions that he seems almost incapable of love.

One result, then, of Larkin's testimony, in the last decade or so of his life, to his own narrowness of mind and feeling has been the tendency to see the poetry strictly as versified versions of Larkin's prose statements. There are plenty of lines in the Larkin oeuvre that seem to be just that, of course. "Oh, no one can deny / That Arnold is less selfish than I" (from "Self's the Man"), "Get stewed: / Books are a load of crap" (from "A Study of Reading Habits"), and "They fuck you up, your mum and dad" (from "This Be The Verse") are only a few of the more famous ones.

Yet in fact Larkin's poetry amounts to much more than this. For a proper understanding of that poetry, it is necessary to place him in the tradition of English poetry of the last century. Larkin always considered himself a member of the "English line" of verse. This tradition was said to include such writers as Thomas Hardy, A. E. Housman, and Edward Thomas—all poets of empirical doubt and stoical remove. Larkin's youthful infatuation with Yeats—the "foreign," Symbolist-inspired Romantic whose work is perceived to be the antithesis of that of the "English line" poets—was clearly seen in Larkin's first book of poetry, *The North Ship,* published in 1946. His abandonment of Yeats, quick on the heels of *The North Ship,* was, in the poet's own words, "undramatic, complete, and permanent." It is more likely, however, that it was dramatic, incomplete, and impermanent. For despite Larkin's claim to being "less deceived" (the words he would use as the title for his second book of poetry, published in 1954) by Yeatsian illusions of poetic transcendence, traces of Larkin's first master persist throughout his poems. In the concluding essay of the anthology called *Larkin at Sixty* (1982), Seamus Heaney characterizes Larkin's poetic career—correctly, it seems to me—as a quarrel between the visionary impulse of Yeats and the earth-bound mundanity of Hardy. Heaney finds, in lines such as "O wolves of memory! Immensements!" (from "Sad Steps," in Larkin's last collection, *High Windows,* published in 1974) and, in "Water," from *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964)—

> And I should raise in the east
> A glass of water
> Where any-angled light
> Would congregate endlessly.

—the "symbolist transports" we normally associate with a poet like Yeats. These "epiphanies," as Heaney calls them, inject elements of hope throughout a book that would otherwise be almost all bleakness, despair, and bitterness.

We see this struggle best in two poems not discussed by Heaney. In "The Old Fools" (from *High Windows*), an empirical, "Hardyesque" speaker muses on approaching death:

> . . . It's only oblivion, true:
> We had it before, but then it was going to end,
> And was all the time merging with a unique
> endeavour
> To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower
> Of being here. Next time you can't pretend
> There'll be anything else . . . .

Larkin appears to take Hazlitt's wonderful remark about death ("There was a time when we were not: this gives us no concern —why then should it trouble us that a time will come when we shall cease to be?")—certainly one of the most consoling and happily "deceived" in all of English literature—and deals it a crushing blow. But does he? Larkin summons some distinctly Romantic language—"To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower / Of being here"—to make his very un-Romantic point. The result is an attitude of some ambiguity.

Another ambiguous poem is the well-known "Days," from *The Whitsun Weddings,* quoted here in full:

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What are days for?
Days are where we live.
They come, they wake us
Time and time over.
They are to be happy in:
Where can we live but days?

Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields.

The question of the here-and-now empiricist—"Where can we live but days?"—is exploded by the illogical, nightmare image in the last two lines. The anti-rational imagination Larkin spurns in the first stanza (not to mention throughout his prose writings) is here given equal weight with the voice of detached intelligence. This brief poem throws into relief the conflicting impulses at the core not only of Larkin's poetic sensibility but of the entire tradition of the "English line" as well.

"Days" and "The Old Fools," however, were written years ago. The sad truth is that Larkin published little poetry in the last decade of his life. The few poems he did publish show him no longer as inclined to be "deceived" by images of transcendence as he once had been. The conflict which had persisted in his verse grew dimmer as his poetic impulse waned, and what replaced it was the sheer fear of death. Thomas Hardy had managed to waylay his fear of death when he was old by inventing an obsession for a dead wife he had shown no affection for while she was alive. One can only wonder how Edward Thomas would have coped with old age, had he survived the First World War. Larkin seemed constitutionally incapable of harboring any forgetful illusion as Hardy did. He certainly foreswore the visionary splendor of his earlier poems. His last published poem, "Aubade," which appeared in 1977, is as devoid of any "hopeful" transcendent impulses as anything Larkin had ever written.

In reply to the question why he wrote poetry, Larkin said: "You want [your poems] to be seen and read, you're trying to preserve something. Not for yourself, but for the people who haven't seen it or heard it or experienced it." *Not for yourself, but for the people who haven't seen it or heard it* . . . . The man speaking these words is the real Larkin, the Larkin we shall remember, the Larkin who wrote the last line of the poem "An Arundel Tomb" (from *The Whitsun Weddings*)—a line which could easily serve as Larkin's epitaph: "What will survive of us is love." It is, precisely, this elusive "love" that lies behind every line Larkin strove to perfect for us, his readers.

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Larkin's voice

by X. J. Kennedy

It had to be, in the end, a common cancer that bore off Philip Larkin. He could hardly have died with a flourish, like Saint-Exupéry, by charging off into the sky on a mission of reconnaissance only to vanish; or like Hemingway, by blowing out his brains. Nor could he go, like Matthew Arnold, in a burst of joy that stopped his heart in midair while leaping a fence to welcome a granddaughter. No, the dismal ordinariness of life, which Larkin so fondly celebrated, had to bring him down by its own dull strategies.

As a critic, to be sure, he delighted in being a curmudgeon. The gist of his message, given in his introduction to a sheaf of record reviews, *All What Jazz,* is that art, unless it helps us to enjoy and to endure, is nothing at all. In deliberately cultivating a stance of reaction—blaming Picasso for placing two eyes on the same side of a face, Henry Moore for perforating his figures, Samuel Beckett for setting out his actors with the trash—Larkin seems hardly a serious foe of modernity. But for the great modern artist's hordes of inferior imitators, he is a dangerous critic to meet in a dark alley. What refreshes in Larkin's complaint isn't its querulous tone, but its brash willingness to risk the charge of philistinism. Here, he implies, am I, a reasonably intelligent man willing to utter the worst doubts of the man in the street. And along with this trusty consumer, Larkin distrusts jazz that tends toward a shrill scream, the canvas that stays empty, the poem that in matter and form seems a mere accidental array of beard-mutterings.

Like John Betjeman, whom he admired, Larkin achieved a poetry from which even people who distrust poetry, most people can take comfort and delight. Surely it is the poetry that seems his enduring testament: only 105 pages, not counting *The North Ship,* an early collection of Yeats-imitations that the author came to disparage. Yet what a monolith, those 105 pages! In it, Larkin performs the feat of transfixing drab, awful postwar England: the seediness of Mr. Bleaney's room, with its fusty bed and a souvenir saucer in which to snuff out cigarettes, a window-view of "a strip of building-land,/ Tussocky, littered." It is the run-down boarding-house scene of *Lucky Jim,* whose anti-hero, the cynical little twit pretending to be a scholar, Kingsley Amis is supposed to have modeled after Larkin.

But Larkin was no Lucky Jim. Had Amis's Jim won the job of university librarian at Hull, he would quickly have sold the library's Second Folio, replaced it with a facsimile, and taken off with the proceeds to Aruba. Larkin stayed at his post for thirty years, presiding over the transformation of a small provincial library into a very nearly great one, increasing its collections fourfold and directing a staff that grew from a dozen to more than a hundred. He mounted a successful campaign to help Britain hang on to its literary manuscript holdings. In life, he was a man

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who shouldered with good grace crushing responsibility.

Still, it is the voice of some unlucky Jim that addresses us in Larkin's best-known early poems: "Toads," in which the speaker wishes he might instantly blarney his way to fame, love, and money, but knows he won't; "Poetry of Departures," with its mingled envy and contempt for those who have "chucked up everything/And just cleared off." Any of these poems follows an order almost like a formula, as does the still more celebrated "Church Going." The speaker confesses himself torn between two attractive and irreconcilable attitudes (faith and doubt, or whatever), wrestles with an insoluable ethical dilemma, and in the end imposes a quick solution on it. I like these poems, but not nearly so well as certain other, deeply compassionate poems, in which Unlucky Jim falls mute: "Wedding-Wind," a marvelous act of female mimicry, seemingly written to show that the poet can imagine passionate fulfillment, if he so wants; or "At Grass," that superb evocation of old race horses put out to pasture—

> Do memories plague their ears like flies?
> They shake their heads. Dusk brims the
> shadows.
> Summer by summer all stole away,
> The starting-gates, the crowds and cries—
> All but the unmolesting meadows.

That doesn't budge from memory. Nor does the wry and heartily envious title poem of *The Whitsun Weddings,* with its affectionate view of newly married proletarians; neither does "An Arundel Tomb," "Broadcast," nor in the last collection, *High Windows* of 1974, "Vers de Société," that frank and funny meditation on the pleasures and pains of bachelor solitude, nor "Cut Grass," a lyric that defies the reader's fear that nothing good can come of rhymes so trite (*breath/death, hours/flowers, June/strewn*). In what quiet triumph this last poem ends, with a view of

> White lilac bowed,
> Lost lanes of Queen Anne's lace,
> And that high-builded cloud
> Moving at summer's pace.

Clearly, these are stupendously well-made poems, sometimes pursuing patterns so ingenious that the reader is hardly aware of their ingenuity—the alliterative l-sounds there, the rhyme-schemes that seem worked out on a calculator. In all great metrical poets from Wyatt to Hardy, I suspect, there is an element of self-flagellation: of setting oneself impossible goals, and winning through to them at terrible cost in time, toil, and spirit. In such poems, Larkin shows, I think, as keen a sense of rhyme as we can find in the work of any English-speaking poet; and, of all English and American poets of our time, perhaps rivaled only by Frost, he shows the best sense of the pulsebeat that resides in idioms. His language, however ordinary, is chosen brilliantly ("a snivel on the violins"), and it is woven together so well that it seems not likely to unravel.

Unlike the typical American orphic bard of the moment, Larkin never says, "Behold! I am one hell of a brilliant visionary, and my life is the most important thing in the world —admire me, damn you, or die." By contrast, the voice of Larkin, modest and clear and scrupulous, is that of a man who sees himself as just a bit silly: the amateur student of architecture who, entering a church, takes off his cycle-clips "in awkward reverence." In the end, I think, we love Larkin for admitting to a quality we recognize in ourselves—a certain dull contentment with our lives, for all their crashing ignobility.

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The career of Gaston Gallimard

by Frederick Brown

During the past decade, more and more attention has been paid to the role that certain publishers played in French literary life of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Books about Louis Hachette, Georges Charpentier, Bernard Grasset, and now Gaston Gallimard—the subject of a new biography by Pierre Assouline[1]—illuminate the peculiar conditions defining a business that has always been held to transcend mere business, in which men who could rightfully account themselves captains of the industry they helped to create also figured as soldiers of intellect and promoters of cultural reform. Such men have become almost legendary. The imprints with which each one marked his age no longer bespeak a personal temperament, style, or adventure but survive, where they do survive, as ornaments that lend moral prestige to bland, corporate entities.

Born in 1881, Gaston Gallimard grew up on the Right Bank, in the social environment immortalized by Marcel Proust. Indeed, his father had much in common with Charles Swann, being a bourgeois scion who set himself a leisurely course that saw him progress downward through life from youthful aestheticism to middle-age dissipation. What Gallimards before him had earned in commerce Paul Gallimard spent on *objets d'art* and the woman he married at age thirty brought a dowry sufficient to let him pursue his hobbies without restraint. "In the idiotic world of bibliophiles, in the world of people slavishly devoted to old printed matter, this fellow Gallimard, who will spend three thousand francs for a private, deluxe editon of a modern work like *Germinie Lacerteux,* stands alone," Edmond de Goncourt observed in 1889. Books of this kind lined his shelves, but it was the art on his walls that attested most persuasively to his flair for recognizing modern genius and investing in it. Beside Corots and Delacroix hung works by Courbet, Manet, Monet, Degas, Boudin, Cassatt, Toulouse-Lautrec, Cézanne, Sisley, and especially Renoir.

With the last he enjoyed a close friendship. During the 1890s they regularly travelled abroad together and Gallimard's country estate near Deauville in Normandy was one of those preserves to which Renoir paid impromptu visits, toting all his paraphernalia, whenever the urge came upon him. Gallimard, in turn, often appeared at the Renoir household. "He always brought in with him the magic atmosphere of Parisian life," wrote Renoir's son, Jean. "He reflected the glory of the brilliant performances which took place in his theater, the Variétés. My father often used to repeat passages from *Orpheus in the Underworld* to us, asking Abel Faivre to sit at the piano and play him

1 *Gaston Gallimard: Un demi-siècle d'édition française* by Pierre Assouline; Editions Balland, 493 pages. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich will be publishing an English translation of the book in 1987.

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some of the Offenbach airs that he especially liked. Consequently I developed the greatest admiration for this visitor who was on such intimate terms with Jupiter, Cupid and La Belle Hélène." Renoir himself called him "a real eighteenth-century Frenchman."

No doubt Renoir had in mind the rakish side of eighteenth-century France, for Paul Gallimard, possessed by the *démon du midi,* began to collect women rather than art when he reached fifty. Buying an important theater was like lowering a net into the fishing ground of demimondaines, and these fast swimmers, whom Dumas *fils,* among others, had decried as a threat to the bourgeois order, accomplished Gallimard's estrangement from his family. "[He] now spends all his evenings at the Variétés, sporting a boutonnière, amid the hetaerae of his establishment . . . and loudly declares that artists, who were until now his boon companions, are melancholy, sad, bothersome creatures and that he wishes henceforth to surround himself with gaiety," noted Goncourt. One by one, his paintings joined him in a townhouse he bought on the rue de Clichy, where day generally began after nightfall. His sons—Gaston, Raymond, and Jacques—stayed behind. It was as if they, and the memory of hours spent with Claude Monet at Giverny, belonged to another life.

Time would tell how deeply this example affected Gaston. The adolescent portrayed by those who knew him well seemed bent on making amends for it. As quiet and even prudish as Paul Gallimard was flamboyant, he cut an unremarkable figure, betraying no inclination to shine or seduce, to question the pieties of his class or stray from the path of duty. Lawyers, notaries, and stockbrokers were much in evidence when the clan assembled at dinner on Mondays, and this ritual gathering, though painfully incomplète without father, provided a counterweight to his absence. There was also school. At Condorcet, the neighborhood lycée where Mallarmé taught English and Proust had been awakened to modern philosophy, Gaston met young men (notably Roger Martin du Gard) with whom he formed friendships that later stood him in good stead.

Duty relaxed its grip on him before he took the *baccalauréat* examination, however. He dropped out of school and, succumbing to what Pierre Assouline describes as his constitutional "nonchalance," became a Right Bank dandy—a *boulevardier.* "He was elegant in his carriage, his attitudes, his gestures . . . . He abhorred errors in taste and exhibitionism and played the esthete's casual air off against the stiffness of phoney dukes." Café society led him on a constant round from plays to salons to balls to concerts by way of visits to his tailor. Later in life, he would declare that contempt was all he had ever felt for Paul Gallimard, but this social agenda, which could easily have brought them face-to-face on any evening at the Café Weber or the Pré Catelan, implies a more ambivalent relationship. Like his father, Gaston loved everything that made *fin-de-siècle* Paris the hedonist's Promised Land.

Like his father, he loved in particular the excitement generated by the Boulevard, with its ornate theaters, its beautiful women, its gastronomic ingenuity, its odor of perfumed rot. When a fashionable playwright named Robert de Flers, who had been Proust's schoolmate at Condorcet, needed an assistant to help him monitor rival playwrights, he chose Gaston as someone well suited for such espionage, and Gaston came through. The by-product of their collaboration was a newspaper column about life behind the scenes, which appeared unsigned. It did not redound to young Gallimard's credit at home. Nor did it suggest that a man so obviously absorbed in idle gossip could even imagine crossing over to the Left Bank and joining with the solemn, high-minded literati, led by André Gide, who had founded the *Nouvelle Revue Française.* Yet this is what happened at the beginning of 1911.

The ground on which the NRF established itself and the staunchness it showed in defending its values inspired antagonists to characterize it as "Protestant." Protest it did.

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Where Anatole France reigned, Gide's companions saw mediocrity triumphant. Romanticism having degenerated into a widely shared taste for the overstuffed and overstated, and Classicism having become another name for the xenophobia of militant reactionaries affiliated with *L'Action française*, they felt trapped between Scylla and Charybdis. Patriotic self-infatuation, religious bigotry unleashed during the Dreyfus Affair, commercialism, facile rhetoric were the evils that held literature in thrall, and this Left Bank group took it upon itself to improve matters by setting an example of critical stringency. With no *parti pris* except the belief that their countrymen could profit from foreign influence, they recognized not only Europe outside France but a France that the custodians of French culture had seen fit to disinherit. "France dried up and prissy, curious about itself and itself alone, huddled over its past as over a wizard's book of spells, intent on understanding itself from one angle, on mutilating its historical glory" was how Gide assailed rabid nationalists in whose lexicon words like "hybridization," "deracination," "transplantation" meant danger. "It is noteworthy that our greatest artists have most often been the products of hybridization and the result of deracination—transplantation I mean," he sneered. Hospitality to the foreigner extended above all to banished creatures of the mind. The loftiness of the NRF did not keep it from extolling artists who ventured underground, who exploited "the incomparable material found in the lower, wild, feverish, uncleaned regions." Along these lines, Jacques Rivière wrote a piece entitled "Metaphysics of Dream," while Gide himself expounded on Dostoevsky.

After two years of existence, the *Nouvelle Revue Française* had acquired a sufficient readership to justify the idea of enlarging its sphere of influence and publishing books under its imprint. An informal search began in 1910 for someone who could direct this enterprise yet bend to Gide's will, who would help finance it and not expect immediate dividends, who had the acumen of a businessman and the taste of a literary mandarin. No candidate was found to embody such paradoxical virtues, but Gallimard's name recurred more often than any other, despite the onus he bore of coming from a milieu scorned by his future confrères. What may have been discernible even before he started work was a gift that proved as useful to them as his fortune. "At twenty-five, without being highly cultivated, he possessed an infallible instinct that led him straight to works of distinction, not for reasons he could articulate logically but out of a kind of gluttony," wrote Jean Schlumberger, who stood just below Gide at the NRF.

Operating in cramped quarters, soliciting manuscripts in his own hand, and relying on the prestige of the NRF to command attention, Gallimard improvised valiantly. The pleasure he found in serving a worthwhile cause mitigated the pain of being treated as a dapper subordinate whose opinions were contaminated by his worldliness. It was some time before the dynamo pent up inside the former playboy overcame this prejudice. Days did not have hours enough to satisfy his appetite for work and when, in 1913, the NRF's first editor in chief, Jacques Copeau, founded the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier—a repertory theater which stood opposite the Boulevard in every sense—Gallimard took on the additional burden of administering it. Only war could slow him down. Exempted from military service, he followed Copeau to New York, where the French government had the Vieux-Colombier play for Franco-American solidarity, but otherwise he languished in a void, until his nerves gave out. "Your health is what counts, it's one of the bases of everything I hold dear—the common enterprise no less than our friendship," wrote Roger Martin du Gard, an NRF author (and future Nobel laureate), who was serving at the Front. "We must ardently cling to it and make all necessary sacrifices."

This common enterprise had in fact never been free of dissension between Gallimard and Gide, and during the war, which af-

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forded them the leisure to cultivate their differences, an open rift developed. Gide could not pardon Gallimard for having grown in stature, while Gallimard felt increasingly unhappy with constraints placed upon him by Gide. The issue of financial solvency brought them smack against each other. Much as he desired it, Gide was fearful that expansion would ruin the occult milieu in which he functioned best and thus work to Gallimard's advantage. For in Gallimard he saw not only the bogeyman of commercialism but someone even more sinister, namely, the conqueror or paterfamilias whose boldness made him shrink. Two such egos needed separate quarters, which is what Gide proposed in a note apparently expurgated from the Pléiade edition of his journal. "In order to avoid being held responsible for attitudes and acts I would publicly disavow if friendship did not restrain me, I'd rather the imprint of the house were changed," he wrote. "I agree with Copeau that Gallimard alone should decide policy, but in that case it behooves him, and him alone, to sign his decisions . . . ." Immediately after the war, in 1919, matters were set right when the "Librairie de la NRF" became the "Librairie Gallimard."

Though Gaston now ruled, his brother Raymond serving as chief administrative officer, in other respects past practice held sway. The mercurial Gide flitted in and out, writers blessed by the review could expect consecration from the publisher, and an atmosphere of "we the happy few," which had always pervaded the NRF, continued to make itself felt. While every hopeful author knew that at, say, Editions Bernard Grasset he would plead before a jury of one, at Gallimard verdicts emerged anonymously from a Readers Committee meeting every week in secret session. "The Readers Committee is an institution typical of Gallimard," notes Assouline. "In the early twenties it acquired an aura of mystery and prestige which it deliberately cultivated." The hush that fell over Librairie Gallimard whenever this episcopal body convened became habitual, and employees tended to speak among themselves *sotto voce.* A satirist searching for a quip could not have done better than the wag who once dubbed Copeau's Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier "The Calvin Follies."

Furthermore, Gaston Gallimard's first great victory consummated maneuvres that had taken place under the old regime. In 1912, Marcel Proust, whom he knew slightly, broached the idea of submitting a novel. Given some encouragement, Proust sent along fourteen hundred typed pages, which were skimmed by Gallimard's fellow editors and, at their regular Thursday afternoon conference, discarded as the work of an effete snob chummy with the wrong people. "Not for us, it's full of duchesses. And besides, it's dedicated to Calmette, director of *Figaro,*" Gide is reported to have said. No sooner did Grasset publish *Du côté de chez Swann* in 1917 (at the author's expense) than remorse swept the NRF. Gallimard undertook to woo Proust back and, after a courtship byzantine in its legal ramifications, succeeded in doing so. The unsold stock of *Du côte de chez Swann* travelled by pushcart from Grasset to the NRF's establishment on rue Madame, where Gallimard had it put between new covers. Two years later, in 1919, its sequel, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur,* won Proust and Gallimard a Goncourt prize.

This was destined to be the first of many prizes Gallimard wrested from Grasset as these archrivals fought tooth and nail for literary gold in the aftermath of a war that had made a number of venerable old publishing houses go bankrupt. Success begot success and every year his editorial prospectors—Jean Paulhan, Brice Parain, Robert Aron, Bernard Groethuysen, Benjamin Crémieux, André Malraux, among others—came up with fresh talent, they themselves being writers whose work added to the firm's luster. "Gaston Gallimard left no stone unturned: the idea that someone else might capture a book or writer of consequence gave him fits," Assouline observes. The passion for collecting expressed itself more generously, to nobler ends, and on a

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grander scale in Gaston's life than in Paul Gallimard's, but his father nonetheless shadowed him and may have been bound up in his mind with the rival from whom he stole one author after another. "For the most part, authors are not men," he told a confidant. "They are females, whores whose services one buys in the knowledge that they are always ready to offer themselves elsewhere." This filial resemblance grew stronger during the 1930s, when he achieved preeminence as a publisher. In 1930, on the verge of his fiftieth birthday, he left the woman he had married eighteen years earlier to take a second wife, who could not have entered holy matrimony without realizing that she would be, at best, *prima inter pares.* Surrounded by female admirers, Gallimard denied himself nothing, least of all the companionship of Valentine Tessier, an actress from Copeau's troupe. It was for her that he tried his hand at producing films and especially a film based on *Madame Bovary,* in which the Gallimard family saga came full circle: Tessier played the titular role under Jean Renoir's direction.

With multilingual editors each of whom was the firm's proconsul in a foreign literature, Gallimard, true to yet another NRF tradition, had them bring home exotic goods and stood behind their enthusiasm for Faulkner, Joyce, and Kafka. He also made the most of France's patrimony by acquiring, through André Gide, the "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade." This beautifully designed library was the brainchild of a Russian-Jewish immigrant named Jacques Schiffrin, who found that with bible paper he could force sprawling classics into modest volumes. The economic crisis spelled disaster for him, but Gide importuned Gallimard to salvage the collection and after several years, in 1933, overcame his misgivings. What Gallimard halfheartedly bought would all by itself have assured him fame and fortune. More scholarly now than in its original incarnation, the collection has continued to grow, proliferating even beyond France in the Pléiade-inspired Library of America.

Between the wars, hardly a year passed that did not see Gallimard adopt or father a collection, a review, a newspaper. By means of such dependent organs (*Les Nouvelles littéraires, La Revue du cinéma, La Revue musicale, La Revue juive, Voilà, Marianne,* etc.) he found it possible to advertise gratis, to run novels serially, to employ down-at-heel authors, to balance the losses he took on poetry. But they reflected as well his imperial will to reach every public, and nowhere was this made more evident than in the creation of a weekly tabloid called *Détective,* which specialized in *faits divers,* or lurid reports about criminal mischief. "In the austere publishing house . . . the paper was viewed as a bastard of noble descent," writes Assouline. "It wasn't hidden, for there would have been no way to conceal the bond between Gallimard and *Détective* . . . but neither was it mentioned." Like turn-of-the-century aristocrats who staged masquerades at which they impersonated characters from Zola's *L'Assommoir* and who, for occasional Saturday-night entertainment, sauntered through the dangerous slum known as "Apache territory," Gallimard had no trouble descending beneath himself, or recognizing a Gallimard in his uncouth child. On the contrary, this hugely profitable venture, which inspired several equally profitable series of detective novels, gave him as much satisfaction as his legitimate offspring. "On Tuesdays, when it was put to bed, Gaston often dropped by with Raymond and Valentine Tessier, before the staff capped off the evening at a working-class restaurant in La Villette. 'Let's go see the circus!' he would say to them." The esoteric crowd at Librairie Gallimard stifled him (especially Jean Paulhan, who carried furtiveness so far as to write editorial notes in Malagasy), while lower down, among barkers fluent in the language of the vulgus, he felt free. Camaraderie on that level became increasingly important during the 1930s, when his upper house was torn by ideological strife. A reconciler rather than a militant, a collector whose principle of discrimination did not operate between Right and Left (any more than it had between

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Right Bank and Left Bank), Gallimard saw himself transcending all parties. "I forbid you to make me face my own contradictions," he once thundered at the firm's commercial director and what this implied —a contempt for inner boundary lines— extended to dogma in general.

Ignoring boundary lines was a habit one could not indulge with impunity under Nazi rule, however. In June 1940, Gallimard joined the horde of civilians who fled southward when Hitler's army overran Northern France and for five months—months spent mainly on the Côte d'Azur—debated whether to wait out the storm in America or to resume his entrepreneurial life in the occupied zone. To do the latter involved one significant condition of which informants up north made him aware, which was that he accept as the NRF's new editor in chief a fascist writer named Pierre-Eugène Drieu La Rochelle. Galled by this arrangement but no less galled by the prospect of relinquishing his literary treasure trove, of marking time somewhere beyond the pale, and of losing out to Bernard Grasset, who was already currying favor with the Pétain government at Vichy, he found Paris irresistible. "It's in Paris that one must be," he told Gide in December 1940.

Several months earlier, the Union of French Publishers had signed a "censure agreement" that established policy in accordance with rules laid down by Germany's ambassador, Otto Abetz, after whom was named the "Otto list" of banned books. "Implementing the censure agreement, German authorities are about to publish a first list . . . of works withdrawn from the market either at their behest or on the initiative of publishers," a Union circular warned in September.

> Other lists may follow, inspired by the spirit of the agreement. An impartial examination of the Otto list reveals the large number of foreign authors who had found refuge on our French soil and whose works had come to clutter our domain. French thought has risen to such heights in world history that we need entertain no fears. Thus disencumbered, it will express itself in all its fullness and radiate as brilliantly as before . . . . Every French publisher is wholly responsible for his own stock. He must see to it that what he publishes (a) neither overtly nor in some disguised form undermine German prestige and interests (b) not be the work of any author whose works are banned in Germany . . . .

The *Propagandastaffel* dinned the message that France's fall had been engineered not by Germany but by alien residents masquerading as Frenchmen, whom the French were advised to purge of their own accord and for their own salvation. Germany would help France recover her "true" identity. "The international spirit formerly presiding over literary exchanges—mainly of Jewish origin, as Bernard Grasset has noted" was how one Nazi publisher denounced their common enemy, and collaborators availed themselves of this line to point an accusatory finger at Gallimard in particular. "A gang of malefactors functioned in French literature from 1909 until 1939 under the orders of a leader: Gallimard," wrote Jean Mamy in the collaborationist paper *Au pilori*. "Thirty years of abject and underhanded propaganda in favor of anarchy, of revolutionaries of every stripe, of the 'antis': antifascists, anti-nationalists, anti-anything-at-all. Thirty years of literary, spiritual, human nihilism! . . . Gallimard wishes to return and already the negroes, negroids, and gallimardic negrophiles have gathered at the Deux Magots for their thirty pieces of silver!"

Such gusts of hatred would often rock him during the next four years as he steered through the Occupation trimming his sails to the wind yet doing what could be done to stay on course. Unlike Jacques Copeau, whose brief, inglorious administration at the Comédie-Française in 1940-41 left him shattered, Gallimard was made of pragmatic stuff, and experience had taught him how to sleep with the compromises necessary for survival in a morally equivocal world. Since survival depended on paper, and the acquisition of paper on evidence that one did

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not spurn German literature, he published Goethe (Goethe having been officially Aryanized) and two novels by Ernst Jünger, which he might have bought under any circumstances. The same imperative prompted him to attend functions at the German Institute, where Parisian literary folk hobnobbed with Nazi brass. These were not seen to be merely venial sins on Judgment Day, but Gallimard, who also sheltered *résistants,* could argue in his own defense that, by and large, fellow publishers behaved worse than he. As one journalist noted in 1941, "It seems that French publishing, through the voice of its directors, has adopted the motto of the Head of State—'Work, Family, Fatherland'—and has loyally set out . . . to publish books that drive this motto home." The Occupation did wonders for trade, and if paper had been abundant, publishers would have known even greater prosperity flogging three-decker novels to an imprisoned people who sought refuge in fiction from hunger, boredom, and moral distress. "As far as the book trade is concerned, these are euphoric times," observed Albin Michel's literary director, and euphoria sustained itself with arguments that made a virtue of business-as-usual. "Nowadays we have more clients than we want, or, rather, more than we can satisfy. However, as long as we aren't halted by material obstacles we shall work with faith and the certitude that it is our one way of 'serving' at this moment."

It was not easy to thwart a foe shrewd enough to exploit the spiritual wealth of captive nations. At times, distinguished writing served the Reich even more effectively than arrant propaganda, as Gallimard learned when he bought yet another magazine, *Comoedia,* and transformed it into a classy journal that numbered among its contributors Paul Valéry, Jean-Paul Sartre, Arthur Honegger, Jean Cocteau, Henri de Montherlant, and Jean Giraudoux. The tribute exacted by Gallimard's overlord amounted to a single page in each issue where Nazi-sponsored cultural events (the Bayreuth Festival, Mozart week) or books translated from German received special mention. But the hidden price paid for this weekly symposium went beyond such reckoning. The magazine's quality was made to speak against those in the outside world who accused Nazis of ruthless barbarism. "*Comoedia* lent credence to the image of occupied France being propagated abroad by the Nazis . . .: a country whose brilliant culture had not been stifled, but, on the contrary, [allowed to flourish]," writes Assouline.

In the aftermath of liberation, when tribunals sprang up everywhere, harsher punishment was meted out to writers who had aided and abetted the enemy than to publishers who published them. A "purification committee" looked hard at Gallimard, but the case made against him by Vercors crumbled under the weight of favorable testimony offered by Malraux, Aragon, Sartre, Camus (a house reader), Salacrou, Paulhan, and Eluard. Only one man might have discredited their assertion that Gallimard had held the plague-stricken NRF in strict quarantine and he, Drieu La Rochelle, killed himself shortly before he stood trial, leaving, as virtually his last words: "I read and I wait. I will die sooner or later. I don't believe in literature and I think the time of literature is gone." The wrath of a jury that could neither hang Drieu nor blame Gallimard fell on the NRF itself, which it sentenced to death.[2]

With this burdensome past liquidated, Gallimard began filling gaps in his collection, and it tells us something about France's postwar leap from scapegoat justice to general amnesty that the authors he openly courted in 1950 had been marked men in 1945. First came Henri de Montherlant, who deserted Bernard Grasset after twenty-eight years of marriage. Gallimard then set his cap for Louis-Ferdinand Céline, an outspoken anti-Semite whose novels the French government banned until 1951. "I would be so happy to be able to publish Céline," Céline's agent remembers Gallimard saying. "I have brought to my house the greatest

2 It was subsequently revived under the title *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française.*

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names in literature: Gide, Claudel, Faulkner, Valéry . . . . Everyone! And the only one I've bungled is Céline. I let him slip through my fingers, which was a mistake . . . ." Gallimard corrected his mistake. The abuse to which Céline took pleasure in subjecting him was the price he gladly paid for a trophy that furthered his monopolistic designs on twentieth-century French literature.

This monopoly, or the will to preserve it, is what saw Gallimard reach eighty and then ninety with his wits very much intact. Absorbing other firms, riding through dynastic quarrels that seriously divided the house, and meanwhile spurning all official honors, he became a law unto himself. To be sure, old age did not spare him moments of bleak summing up. "I bungled my life . . . and from the time I became a businessman lost my real friends," he confided to the novelist, Louis Guilloux. "You know, I don't sleep. The other night I composed a whole book . . . . You're lucky because you have your vocation. Not me. All I have is money and money does me no good. At bottom I like only men who fail. The greatest always commit suicide." But when he died at ninety-four, the phrase that had gained currency in Paris—*Hors Gallimard, point de littérature* (outside Gallimard, there is no literature)—could have been inscribed on his stone without doing serious violence to the truth.

Pierre Assouline has used rich material to dubious effect. His work is not so much a biography as it is a journalistic hodgepodge that leaves important questions unanswered and significant details unexamined. One doesn't learn from it what went into Gallimard's lifelong passion for theater, why Sartre exercised such influence over him, who the women were he married, how he groomed his sons, etc. It conveys neither the pith of a culture nor the inner workings of a complex individual. Dwelling on the Occupation years, which take up about a quarter of the book, Assouline skews Gallimard's character while pursuing an argument clearly intended to demonstrate his lack of character. Still, issues of moment are raised, and foremost among them that of Vichy casting its long shadow on present-day France. The amnesia encouraged by Charles de Gaulle, who saw self-scrutiny as an obstacle to national resurgence, has, forty years later, inspired prosecutorial histories. What one generation buried, another exhumes almost vengefully, which calls to mind Freud's dictum that "no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips." So it is here. The trial Gallimard never endured takes place in the chatter of Assouline's narrative.

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The fictive music of Wallace Stevens

by Bruce Bawer

Thirty-one years after his death, more people than ever are reading the sublime poetry of Wallace Stevens, and his critical reputation—which has grown steadily since 1950, the year he was awarded the Bollingen Prize—has never been greater. But even today, in the minds of many readers who feel perfectly at home with his contemporaries Eliot, Yeats, and Williams, the name of Stevens is, beyond all else, synonymous with enigmatic symbolism and abstruse epistemology. To a dismayingly large number of people, indeed, the most interesting thing about him is not his poetry but the fact that he wrote most of it while serving as vice president in charge of surety claims for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company.

The more consideration one gives to this disaffection for Stevens's work among certain types of readers, the more firmly one believes that their problem is not with its difficulty but with Stevens's monolithic impersonality—an impersonality that makes a good deal of Eliot's poetry look, by comparison, positively diaristic—and his devotion to abstraction. In an age when celebrated poets tend to glory either in simpleminded self-celebration or purposeless physical description, these unreceptive readers doubtless find the sort of poetry that Wallace Stevens wrote far from easy to digest.

Two recent books—one an oral portrait, the other a work of academic criticism—seem specifically designed to make the impersonal, intellectual Stevens more congenial to this sort of contemporary reader. The first book is Peter Brazeau's *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (1983), which has just been reissued by North Point Press, and which is based on interviews with dozens of Stevens's surviving friends, relatives, and co-workers.[1] I say "oral portrait" and not "oral biography" because, unlike any number of other recent life studies that are constructed of a series of excerpts from interview transcripts, *Parts of a World* (whose title is taken from that of Stevens's fourth collection of verse) does not, strictly speaking, tell a story. Instead, Brazeau offers us a numbingly monotonous and generally unrevealing series of sepia-toned snapshots, as it were, of Stevens the business executive, Stevens the poet, Stevens the family man. In part, this monotony is unavoidable. Stevens, born in 1879 to a upper-middle-class family in Reading, Pennsylvania, went on to live a life that, on the surface, was extraordinarily uneventful. After attending Harvard College and New York Law School, he married a hometown girl, Elsie Kachel, and spent the remainder of his life married to her and working in insurance. He never travelled to Europe, made virtually no intimate friends, probably never had an affair, and lived one day pretty much the same way as the next. But Brazeau's "oral portrait" format

1 *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered,* by Peter Brazeau. North Point Press; 330 pages, $12.50.

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makes this book even more static and colorless than it had to be. Not only do his interviewees tell us precious little of value about Stevens; they almost invariably tell us every banal detail a dozen times.

The first of the book's three sections, for instance, which is devoted to Stevens the insurance man, consists largely of testimony wherein his former colleagues at the Hartford describe how "gentlemanly" he was (or—take your pick—"urbane," "charming," "courtly," "gracious," "civilized," "distinguished," "polished," "dignified," and "impressive," most of which crop up at least twice); what a "first-class" insurance lawyer he was considered to be (perhaps the best surety-claims man in the country—though one is not quite sure, for a while, precisely what a surety-claims man is); how wonderfully sarcastic (and, to those who misunderstood him, arrogant and insulting) his deadpan humor could be; how lucid, concise and beautifully written were his business letters, how illegible his handwriting, how marvelous his vocabulary; what integrity he displayed in all business matters; and how much he loved imported tea, fresh fruit, good cigars, and cinnamon buns (of which he partook frequently at his desk).

Certainly, some of this material is of real interest. But Brazeau never seems to realize when he's reached the saturation point. For example, when his interviewees explain, one after the other, that they never really got to know Stevens (who believed in all work and no play at the office), Brazeau insists upon giving us every deathless word:

> I didn't see much of Stevens. He was generally tucked away somewhere in connection with his work. He wasn't the kind of fellow, "Well, I'm Wallace Stevens!" He wasn't the blustery type. He just went quietly about his business and did what was necessary.
>
> [Stevens] was a rather aloof person [who liked to] hold people at arm's length . . . . Most executives, whenever they're free to do so, love to sit around and relax, unwind, lollygag. Stevens was not that kind of person. He was not receptive . . . . He was always, to most people who didn't understand him, formidably busy.
>
> He had difficulty relating to people . . . . He was sort of a loner . . . . He was not what I call a hail-fellow-well-met person.
>
> He was hard to get acquainted with.
>
> I always had the feeling that here was a man you just didn't get to know too well. He was always somewhat of a stranger, in the sense that most of the company men that I met I became very friendly with. We had many things that we exchanged, personal things. But you didn't do that with Wallace Stevens. He was always aloof and pretty much his own man.
>
> He was not a warm personality as far as those in the office went. He wanted his privacy and respected the privacy of others.

Not, mind you, that Stevens was a perpetual sobersides. If he steadfastly avoided chummy behavior at the office, he was equally adamant in his refusal to discuss business after hours. Indeed, at parties, and at his beloved Canoe Club (which, one gathers, was the sort of place where George Babbitt would have gone for a good time), he was, with a couple of drinks in him, "one of the boys"—a cutup, a teller of smoking-car jokes, the very picture of "Harvard-Yale football-game levity," who, upon arrival at a nightclub, would tell the orchestra leader to play "Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?" That such words as "playful," "jovial," and "jolly" recur as frequently in the interviews as "austere," "aloof," and "somber" simply affirms that Stevens's life was, as *Hudson Review* editor Frederick Morgan tells Brazeau, "neatly compartmentalized."

And compartmentalized it was, right down the line. Stevens kept his insurance work separate from his home life, and his poetry separate from both. Rarely did he so much as breathe his wife's name at the office; never did he take her to business functions; and only two or three times, in his

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thirty-nine years at the Hartford, did he invite a colleague over to the house for dinner. "It was a standing matter of astonishment at the office," recalls one colleague, "that no one ever got to see his family." Nor, unless they took the trouble to hunt down one of his collections at the local bookstore, did more than a few of them get to see his poetry either. True, once he had published a couple of volumes, it was no secret at the Hartford that there was a poet on the premises. Far from it: he regularly sent his underlings to the Oxford English Dictionary to check the meanings of recondite words that he planned to use in his poetry, and on rare occasions even read poems in progress aloud to associates, asking their opinions. But most of the time he nipped in the bud any attempt on the part of a colleague to engage him in a discussion of poetry, or to persuade him to explicate a given poem.

In the second and third sections of the book, "The Man of Letters" and "The Family Man," Brazeau attempts to open up to us those areas of Stevens's life that he kept to himself at the office. Unfortunately, most of the people interviewed in Part Two—among them such familiar literary names as Richard Wilbur, Harry Levin, Cleanth Brooks, and Léonie Adams—knew Stevens no better than did the folks at work. One problem here is that most of the writers and editors with whom Stevens had extended relationships (William Carlos Williams, for example, and Harriet Monroe) are no longer with us; another problem is that Stevens had, it appears, only two really close literary-type friends in his entire life, neither of them a well-known writer, both of them now deceased: Henry Church (a denizen of an artsy New York clique of which Stevens was, for a time, a sort of associate member) and Judge Arthur Gray Powell of Atlanta (whose colorful conversation inspired the titles and some of the details of several of his poems, among them "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and "Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"). We do learn, in Part Two, that Stevens loved Braque, Klee, Stravinsky, Berlioz, and Greta Garbo, that he highly esteemed Delmore Schwartz (whose work represented, to him, a hope for twentieth-century poetry), and that he disliked Hemingway, Cummings, and Frost (who, for his part, thought of Stevens as a "swell from Harvard"). On the admirable side, Stevens consistently refused to accept payment for lectures, readings, or magazine publication of his poems; on the unadmirable side, he was, alas, as full of the prejudices of his time as anyone else, criticizing a restaurant for catering to Jews and referring to Gwendolyn Brooks as a "coon."

It is not until the last (and briefest) section of the book that Brazeau covers what one feels should have come first—Stevens's parents, his upbringing, his life as husband and father. Since Elsie is dead and his only child, Holly, isn't one of Brazeau's interviewees, the picture of the poet as family man is based solely on the testimony of nieces, neighbors, and the like, who were vouchsafed only occasional glimpses of the Stevenses. Though vague, the picture they paint is a decidedly somber one. There was, unsurprisingly, "not much communication" in the Stevens home—no fighting, just silence at the dinner table and closed bedroom doors. Elsie is variously described as sweet and cruel, pathetic and strict, a naïve homebody, a willing serf; all witnesses agree that she was an excellent cook and an obsessive homemaker, and that neither she nor Stevens was a particularly affectionate parent.

It is in the description of the poet's father, Garrett Barcalow Stevens, that *Parts of a World* comes closest to suggesting an explanation for all this. Garrett Stevens was, as Brazeau explains, a corporate lawyer and amateur versifier who, by every account, was distant, domineering, and emotionally undemonstrative, not to mention highly conscious of his family's "respectability"—all characteristics for which Wallace Stevens would be noted. When young Wallace announced that he wanted to marry Elsie, an undereducated girl both literally and figuratively from "the other side of the tracks," Garrett objected and, when Wallace married her anyway, didn't speak to his son for years.

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A generation later, the pattern repeated itself almost exactly; Holly decided to marry, and Stevens objected on the grounds that the boy she had in mind, whom Stevens called a "Polack," was simply "not her equal." Holly married him anyway, and she and Stevens were, as a result, estranged for several years.

What is one to make of this? Why did Stevens, in so many ways, become a tintype of his father? Why was such an enlightened modern poet weighted down, psychologically, with so much philistine freight? It almost seems as if, in some sense, Stevens was paying his father *hommage*—or, perhaps, penance. If he admired Delmore Schwartz so fervently, surely this admiration had a good deal to do with Schwartz's endless contemplation, in his poetry, of the theme of parents, children, and fate, and of the strong but subtle ties—of guilt and resentment, love and hatred—that bind sons inescapably to their fathers. In this connection, Stevens writes in "Esthétique du Mal" that

> It may be that one life is a punishment
> For another, as the son's life for the father's.

He speaks to the same theme, but takes an utterly different tone, in "Recitation after Dinner," a poem he read at a meeting of the Saint Nicholas Society (whose members all trace their lineage back to the early Dutch settlers). The poem—in which he borrows Virgil's image of Aeneas carrying his father Anchises on his back (an image Stevens used more than once)—helps to account for the keen interest in genealogy that Stevens developed in middle age; in it, he speaks of tradition as

> . . . a clear, a single, a solid form,
> That of the son who bears upon his back
> The father that he loves, and bears him
> from
> The ruins of the past, out of nothing left,
> Made noble by the honor he receives,
> As if in a golden cloud. The son restores
> The father . . . .

Here, then, Stevens sees the father—and, by extension, all the generations preceding him, and the entire past—not as a dreadful burden but as something marvelous and ennobling. There must be an illuminating story behind all of this. But it is not a story that any of Brazeau's interviewees is able to tell us.

Indeed, what *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* demonstrates more persuasively than anything else is the weakness of the composite oral portrait as a form of biography—or, at least, literary biography. With a relatively uncomplicated subject like Andy Warhol's starlet Edie Sedgwick, whose life provided the material for Jean Stein's book *Edie,* this weakness was not critical. With a more substantial subject, though, the oral form is less defensible, its fundamental superficiality far more manifest. If a book like Peter Manso's *Mailer* nonetheless succeeds to a considerable extent, it is because Mailer is a colorful personality who has led an unsettled and combative life, and because he wears his id on his sleeve. But applied to a man like Wallace Stevens—the turbulence of whose soul rarely, if ever, roiled his smooth surface, and who had nothing but contempt for the Hemingway or Mailer type of writer, who gives the impression that he has to throw himself into life in order to write about it—the oral form fails to provide either insight or entertainment in enough abundance to justify the endeavor.

It would be wrong to mention Ernest Hemingway without taking note, in passing, of Stevens's most dramatic—and out-of-character—literary encounter. So strong was Stevens's antipathy for Hemingwayesque prose that, in February of 1936, the insulting remarks that Stevens made at a cocktail party in Key West provoked the novelist to engage him in a fistfight, which Stevens lost and Hemingway magnanimously agreed to keep quiet about. The tussle is symbolic of the utter contrast between the two writers' approaches to their art. If Hemingway strained, in the best Conradian manner, to *present* objective phenomena rather than

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explicitly render his subjective reactions to them, Stevens considered the "mere rendering of an object or scene . . . an imaginative failure." So observes Milton J. Bates in *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self,* our second recent book under consideration.[2]

The relationship between reality and the imagination, of course, is at the thematic center of Stevens's poetry, and is the subject of most of the lectures collected in his sole volume of prose, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (1951). Of the seven pieces in this volume, it is the earliest, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," in which Stevens most fully and coherently explains his aesthetic theory. Poetry, he writes, is a phenomenon characterized by "the interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals." It is not a sedate interdependence but an active, even an agitated, one: for the mind, wherein the imagination resides, "is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality." Yet Stevens does not mean to suggest that, during the writing of poetry, these two entities are at war with one another; on the contrary, the creation of poetry is, to his mind, "not a choice of one over the other and not a decision that divides them, but something subtler, a recognition that here, too, as between these poles, the universal interdependence exists . . . they are equal and inseparable." The measure of a poet is "the measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination." (For instance, a poet may write about creativity, "the maker's rage to order words," by writing about a woman singing on the beach at Key West.)

If twentieth-century poetry is not all that it could be, Stevens suggests, it is because not only poetry but all of the arts have suffered, in modern times, from the "pressure of reality." Reality, in other words, has gained the upper hand over imagination. Why? Because the modern world, as Stevens sees it, is a world no longer able to maintain its belief in its chief imaginary construct (i.e., God), and therefore no longer able to wield the imaginative powers it once commanded. The things of the imagination, as a result, have become weakened, watered down, debased; "the idea of nobility"—to Stevens, a crucial element in poetry, and "imaginary" because it would not exist without a human mind to conceive of it—"exists in art today only in degenerate forms or in a much diminished state."

That Stevens does not consider such an abstract entity as nobility to be "real" does not mean that it is unimportant to him; without such "fictions" as nobility, it is clear, life would be meaningless. And this, in fact, is to him the essential function of poetry in the modern world: to provide us all with a "supreme fiction," a grand, subsuming illusion to take the place of God, and thereby to restore to life its meaning, or, rather, its semblance of meaning—which amounts, in his philosophy, to precisely the same thing. As he says at the end of "The Noble Rider," poetry seems "to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives." Or, in the words of "The Man with the Blue Guitar,"

> The earth, for us, is flat and bare.
> There are no shadows. Poetry
>
> Exceeding music must take the place
> Of empty heaven and its hymns,
>
> Ourselves in poetry must take their place . . . .

I have used the word "philosophy," but Stevens, though he has been described as a philosophical poet, was no philosopher—at least not in the sense that the term is usually understood. His realm was that not of logic

2 *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self,* by Milton J. Bates. University of California Press; 319 pages, $24.95.

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but of intuition; as the title of one of his essays, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," suggests, he saw poetry as a discipline that transcends the boundaries of reason. When, in a late poem called "The Sail of Ulysses," he writes of knowledge—the sort of knowledge, naturally, that poets deal in—he distinguishes it unambiguously from reason:

> . . . knowing
> And being are one: the right to know
> And the right to be are one. We come
> To knowledge when we come to life.
> Yet always there is another life,
> A life beyond this present knowing,
> A life lighter than this present splendor,
> Brighter, perfected and distant away,
> Not to be reached but to be known,
> Not an attainment of the will
> But something illogically received,
> A divination . . . .

In his preoccupation with the imagination, Stevens recalls Coleridge, who (along with the other English Romantic poets) was an important influence upon his conception of poetry. In an essay entitled "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," Stevens describes Coleridge as "defining poetry all his life"; and the fact is that Stevens, in both his prose and his verse, was continually doing the same thing. But he did not do so in the manner of a professional philosopher: like Coleridge, he was both brilliant and unsystematic, at times inconsistent in his terminology, never proceeding from theory but always from feeling.

Coleridge is hardly the only poet or critic who helped to shape Stevens's literary theory and practice. Indeed, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* is largely concerned with identifying the ways in which various writers influenced him. Among these influences are Walter Pater and the Aesthetes, who were all the rage at Harvard when Stevens was an undergraduate there. Though Stevens patently had more regard for everyday reality than did the Aesthetes, he believed, with them, that the poet does not have a "social obligation" to anyone, that poetry's purpose is not to "say something" about life but to attain the nonreferential purity of music, and that the creation of a poem is no less important than any other human activity. The Aesthetes, moreover, must be given much of the credit for Stevens's often récherché diction, bizarre wit, and sumptuous imagery, as well as his Wildean affinity for paradox. The central idea of his *oeuvre*—that modern man must believe in something he knows to be a fiction—is, needless to say, paradoxical, and a number of his poems, like many of Wilde's epigrams, derive their effectiveness largely from the device of saying that X is not X, or X is the opposite of X:

> A. A violent order is a disorder; and
> B. A great disorder is an order . . . .
> —"Connoisseur of Chaos"

> This is form gulping after formlessness . . . .
> —"The Auroras of Autumn"

> We do not prove the existence of the poem.
> It is something seen and known in lesser
> poems.
> It is the huge, high harmony that sounds
> A little and a little, suddenly,
> By means of a separate sense. It is and it
> Is not and, therefore, is . . . .
> —"A Primitive Like an Orb"

> It is possible that to seem—it is to be,
> As the sun is something seeming and it is.
> • • •
> It is a world of words to the end of it,
> In which nothing solid is its solid self.
> —"Description without Place"

> It must be visible or invisible,
> Invisible or visible or both:
> A seeming and unseeming in the eye.
> • • •
> There was a myth before the myth began . . . .
> —"Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"

> A sunny day's complete Poussiniana
> Divide it from itself. It is this or that
> And it is not.
> —"Poem Written at Morning"

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Along with the Aesthetic influence, of course, went that of the French Symbolists. From them Stevens, like most modern poets, learned a number of lessons, among them the value of mystery and ambiguity in poetry. Mallarmé's remarks on this subject, as quoted by Bates, might well have been written by Stevens himself, so well do they describe the way his poetry operates:

> The Parnassians take something in its entirety and simply exhibit it; in so doing, they fall short of mystery; they fail to give our minds that exquisite joy which consists of believing that we are creating something. To *name* an object is largely to destroy poetic enjoyment, which comes from gradual divination. The ideal is to *suggest* the object. It is the perfect use of the mystery which constitutes symbol. An object must be gradually evoked in order to show a state of soul; or else, choose an object and from it elicit a state of soul by means of a series of decodings.

By taking the Symbolist path in this regard, Stevens was, as Bates observes, rejecting not only the Genteel Tradition that had governed American poetry in his youth, but the Imagist revolution as well, whose principal criteria for effectiveness in poetry were simplicity and directness.

Stevens was never one to rush into print, and his first collection, *Harmonium,* did not appear till 1923, when he was forty-four. The book is distinguished by an air of modernist gloom, as exemplified by the final lines of its outstanding poem, "Sunday Morning":

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable.
> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

This anguish about the godlessness of the universe, however, is supplanted in succeeding volumes by the conviction that poetry can and must take the place of God as a principle of order and virtue. "I desire my poem," Stevens once wrote in a letter, referring to "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "to mean as much, and as deeply, as a missal." This determination is evident in one poem after another—in "The Idea of Order at Key West," for instance, wherein the woman singing creates a world:

> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
> Whatever self it had, became the self
> That was her song, for she was the maker.
> Then we,
> As we beheld her striding there alone,
> Knew that there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

In developing the notions that are implicit in this poem, Stevens was in many respects a student of Nietzsche, who recognized the social and psychological benefit of the illusion of God and who said, as Bates reminds us, that "Art is with us in order that we may not perish through truth." Like Nietzsche, Stevens worried that the twentieth century's loss of faith in God would mean, eventually, the loss of faith in the virtues that God represented; thus, like Nietzsche, he was taken with the notion of an imaginary hero, whom Nietzsche called *Übermensch* and Stevens called "major man," who would embody the paramount virtues of the race. The idea of "major man" was introduced in Stevens's single longest poem, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," but is elaborated upon in other poems, including "Paisant Chronicle," wherein Stevens writes that the major men

> . . . are characters beyond
> Reality, composed thereof. They are
> The fictive man created out of men.
> They are men but artificial men. They are
> Nothing in which it is not possible
> To believe . . . .

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To the influence of Nietzsche, we must add that of two philosophers closer to home: William James and George Santayana. Both were professors at Harvard when Stevens was a student there; James published his book *The Will to Believe* less than a year before Stevens entered Harvard, and Santayana published *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* the year Stevens left. In a letter explaining the attitude that informs the book *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,* Stevens invokes the title of James's book:

> Underlying it is the idea that, in the various predicaments of belief, it might be possible to yield, or to try to yield, ourselves to a declared fiction.
>
> This is the same thing as saying that it might be possible for us to believe in something that we know to be untrue. Of course, we do that every day, but we don't make the most of the fact that we do it out of the need to believe, what in your day, and mine, in Cambridge was called the will to believe.

Yet, as Bates observes, Stevens goes beyond James. The philosopher of pragmatism had declared that it is sensible to believe in something that is not known for certain to be true, but which might, indeed, be true; Stevens declared that it is a good idea to believe in something one knows to be false. In taking this position, he was less in line with James than with Santayana, who saw both poetry and religion as fictions of human manufacture—worthwhile, to be sure, but fictions nonetheless.

It was in the Thirties that the convictions Stevens had forged out of these influences—and the poetry that he, in turn, had forged out of these convictions—had the roughest time of it. During the Depression years, Marxist critics habitually condemned Stevens as an elitist, even a fascist, for his refusal to join the vanguard of Socialist Realism by writing poems about enchained workers and bloated capitalist bosses. In *Owl's Clover* (1936), he succumbed to this pressure, in a sense, by attempting, as he put it, "to make poetry out of commonplaces: the day's news"—or, as he explained in a letter to a reviewer of the book, "to dip aspects of the contemporaneous in the poetic." Aesthetically speaking, the results of this experiment were not conspicuously successful; most of the poems in *Owl's Clover* fell far beneath Stevens's usual standard, and did not merit reprinting in *The Palm at the End of the Mind,* the definitive selection from his poetic *oeuvre.*

Rather than regard these poems, however, with the majority of Stevens's critics, as an unfortunate temporary descent into the maelstrom, Bates, while recognizing their literary weaknesses, nonetheless appears to perceive them as a major step in Stevens's development. His extensive discussion of *Owl's Clover,* furthermore, is accompanied by a scholarly disquisition upon the subject of Stevens's attitude toward Marxists—whom Stevens despised not because they were idealists but because they were not his *type* of idealists. Stevens saw himself as a visionary idealist, proceeding "by fits of visionary insight rather than calculation." Marxists, on the contrary, were bound by theory, by their own brand of logic, and claimed to know what they were headed toward: a perfect Communist state, as laid out in the *Manifesto.* Stevens found this sort of programmatic certainty to be at odds with reality as he knew it, not to mention at odds with his convictions regarding the proper function of the imagination. Yet at times, paradoxically, he seems to have seen his Marxist contemporaries as being far more in touch with reality and logic than he. Bates, in discussing these matters, sometimes appears disturbingly willing to accept this characterization of Thirties Marxism, seeing Stevens as the unrealistic, pure poet and the Marxists as the keen-eyed viewers of reality. One manifestation of this tendency is that Stanley Burnshaw—whose fatuous critique of Stevens "inspired" *Owl's Clover* in the first place, and provoked the contemplation of Marxism entitled "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue"—is described by Bates as practicing "intelligent criticism." (In fairness it should be noted that Burnshaw, in

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later years, repudiated the views he held in the Thirties.)

These are not the only problems in Bates's book. He seems to look upon Stevens's poetic theory as being more rigidly and elaborately thought out than it really was, and to regard his poetic practice as having undergone a progressive development from one volume to the next in a fashion that—in one reader's opinion—is a bit too tidy to be thoroughly convincing. There are other flaws: Bates includes a substantial amount of biographical information but does very little with it; he goes on far too long about such matters as the history of leftist poetry in the early part of the century and the journalistic career of Richard Harding Davis (who he feels must have influenced Stevens's brief youthful foray into reporting); and he writes a plodding academic prose that makes reading this potentially absorbing study a wearisome chore. But these misgivings having been registered, it must be said that *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* does succeed, in many respects, in explaining how Stevens came to be the sort of poet that he was.

And what sort of poet, in the final analysis, was he? Decades ago, Yvor Winters labeled Stevens a "hedonist"—the idea being that Stevens's verse was solipsistic, that he was interested merely in his own sensations. Randall Jarrell, for his part, complained that Stevens had his head too far up in the heavens and not even one foot on the ground. But it is difficult for this critic, at least, to discover any justification for such complaints. Far from being preoccupied, in his poetry, either with himself or with dehumanized abstractions, Stevens is, rather, concerned throughout his work with celebrating the miracle of the human mind—its ability to create its own order, to conceive of beauty, to make moral discriminations, to take dominion over the things of earth—the genius of the sea, the slovenly wilderness. His is not the undisciplined joy-seeking of the hedonist or of the wielder of disconnected abstractions, but, on the contrary, the joy of the artist in his own ability to discipline the physical world around him in a comprehensible whole, to find—as Stevens writes in "The Sail of Ulysses"—"meaning in design/Wrenched out of chaos."

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Poems *by Leslie Norris, Curtis Harnack, & Herbert Morris*

Christmas in Utah

In barns turned from the wind
The quarter-horses
Twitch their laundered blankets.
Three Steller's Jays,
Crests sharp as ice,
Bejewel the pine tree.
Rough cold out of Idaho
Bundles irrational tumbleweed
The length of Main Street.

Higher than snowpeaks,
Shriller than the frost,
A brazen angel blows his silent trumpet.

—Leslie Norris

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Night passage

After sundown quiet gulls fly
in from the ocean, over
houses facing the channel,
coming up like pigeons
in a shooting gallery.
No swivel-neck peering
for bits of refuse, or
jealous cries among them—
it's too late for that.
A songbird grace as they pass
singly or in a tattered procession,
guided by afterlight on hilltops.
They'll alight somewhere on the flats,
to feed at dawn in vegetable fields,
though I won't be up to watch them—
just as well, for it might
spoil the mysterious portent
of this oneway travel at dusk:
gulls in the guise of doves,
reverent in holy flight, more
than they could hope to be.
I stand in shadow looking up,
wishing for more of them, urgently
flying in the dim, seeable night.
The last ones seem to know
they're just ahead of the dark.

—*Curtis Harnack*

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William James in Brazil

According to Henry James, William set standards of intelligence, confidence, and common sense which daunted his siblings. Resisting his father's strong desire that he become a scientist, he pursued painting until adolescent study convinced him of his mediocrity. He next studied chemistry, and then anatomy and physiology under Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz. Still dissatisfied, he shifted to Harvard Medical School in 1864. During a collecting expedition to Brazil with Agassiz in 1865-66, he contracted smallpox, which temporarily blinded him.

Dear Harry,
It may be, may very well be,
to you, to you alone, I can confide this:
this blindness is not wholly to be dreaded,
though I suspect—and you shall understand this—
the reasons will have less to do with me,
most likely, and more to do with Brazil.
You, I daresay, would flourish here, would read
into this richness, no doubt, equal richness,
would find, at the least seek, a metaphor
which, to the last detail, might match the scene,
would take this lushness, this profusion, this
extravagance of color, scent, heat, light,
and make of it much more than most would make,
more than your brother Willie knows or cares to.

Cares to: that may state the truth of it best.
This loveliness (I am not blind enough
not to have seen it was that when I saw)
seems to serve only to confuse me further,
cause dizziness, unsettle me, distract me
from what I thought my purpose was to be here.
(I came not for adventure, you remember,
not for diversion, not for the romance—

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spurious, self-induced, in my belief—
with which travel, for others, seems imbued.)
The truth is I am unable to work,
unable to grasp the enormity
of this landscape, the life forms, dawns, the dusks,
unable to distinguish the horizon
from the sky, or the sky from the horizon.
Whatever forces (I cannot yet name them;
they resist, seem to resist, all attempts
at categorization) are at work here,
whatever factors (even clues seem lacking)
conspire to meet here to yield this "Brazil,"
all seems past my capacity to fathom,
to delve into, to wish to delve into.
Whatever definitions, I assure you,
the scientific mind arrives equipped with,
whatever, in the past, one may have known,
or thought one knew, whatever mere degree
of insight one possessed (marginal, brief),
is, or has been, or shall be, unavailing.
(I have, I must admit, some difficulty
even shaping its sound: Brazil, Brazil.)

You, with your taste for ambiguity,
symbol, drama of the interior,
nuance, half-tones, half-lights, glint of refractions,
private experience; you, with your passion
(misplaced passion, according to my view)
for layer upon layer, your insistence
on context, context, context, would quite thrive here,
would find wholly appropriate this setting,
this welter of extremes, of influences,
this disorder, this unremitting chaos.
The possibilities, the combinations,
possible combinations, seem unending,
their infiniteness very much the cause
of this disquiet which has settled on me
("disquiet" does small justice to it, Harry;
it is an affliction as yet unnamed,

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as yet, for that matter, unnamable).
There is nothing here, nothing in this climate,
which is simply itself, not something more,
which does not stand for something else, cannot stand:
the light, fierce, fierce, is more, I swear, than light
(even before this other blindness set in,
that was enough, more than enough, to blind me);
this heat punishes more than mere heat would,
falls, each day, like a curse, and not like weather,
rises from the fields like a visitation,
all dust-enshrouded, all vapor and shimmer;
and in the evening (nights are the worst of it),
when one might expect cooling, shade, reprieve,
when, at last, one might stand out in the open,
it is more than the dark that comes down, Harry:
nothing ceases, retreats, nothing relents,
all of it is much as it was, but more so;
mystery, rather than dissipating, deepens
(and when it does come down, even now, now,
I feel myself, even blind, almost shudder;
though I can see none of it, none, I shudder).

I suppose you might think of me as haunted,
which is most uncharacteristic of me,
as you well know. There are few facts to grasp,
or none, no statistics, no measurements,
which might anchor one to the world one lived in.
I am, perhaps for the first time, adrift,
cut from my moorings, like one of those creatures
in a story you have written, or shall write
(over and over, to my keen dismay),
one of those drab souls, bloodless, wholly juiceless,
from whom whatever life it—he?—possessed
has been squeezed, someone, Harry, whose existence
is thin, or beyond thin, thinner than thin,
his hold quite tenuous on solid objects
(and solidity need not be regarded,
as, I fear, you regard it—even by those,
like yourself, who address themselves, or would,

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to not quite visible manifestations,
auras, to the not readily apparent—
as an enemy). There are worse fates, Harry,
than to live in a world not of one's making.

I think you know what it is I most want:
to have done with the work here, to return
to a life, to a self, known to me. I need
to have Brazil behind me, much behind,
so that one cannot view it short of turning,
short of looking back. (I assure you, nothing
could induce me to turn, then, to look back,
nothing, nothing whatever). "When I get home,
I'm going to study philosophy all my days."
I know that now. Why I could not have known it
earlier quite defies my understanding
(I have, I feel, squandered too much, too much,
dallied too long with what seems not essential),
though it may have to do with being blind now,
with living in these parts, trying to live,
where whatever I touch eludes me, floats off,
vaporizes at a touch, the mere touch.

In the next letter I will send to you
the photographic portrait taken of me
by a man, a Brazilian here, who travels
through the back-country photographing native
tribes never seen before by other men—
wearing a trimmer beard, the little, round,
dark glasses, and the hat, your favorite hat
(plantation hat, you christened it), its wide brim
sweeping upward at both sides of the head
at, I daresay, a quite dramatic angle.
Agassiz claims it came out rather well;
distinctly South American, he calls it.

I wished to say a word about those chapters
from the novella sent a fortnight ago
and read to me the very week they came,

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but the details must wait until next time.
Agassiz' secretary reads your letters
as well as whatever else you may send me,
writes my letters, as well, just as I speak them.
Already I may have (though I try not to)
taxed him, this afternoon, beyond all fairness.
Briefly, I say what I have said before,
which, as before, you must not hear too harshly:
I know no one your characters resemble,
by which I mean they seem, each, not quite human,
not sufficiently lifelike to quite warrant
such relentless speculation about them—
thoughts, motives, gestures, what lies past the words
they speak, beneath the words, beneath the text
you have provided for your readers, Harry.
I am unable to persuade myself
others exist on the exalted plane
where you insist, it seems, on placing them,
locations, to your loss, found on no map.
Possibly too much emphasis is put
on what they feel, and think, not what they do
(your characters, quite simply, do not *do*).
I have never known men and women like that,
nor would I care to. Have you? Would you wish to?
I state this with acute concern: you travel
too much into your own imagination,
too far into those areas unknown
to most of us, of moment to too few.
Might you not see your way to take a step back,
several steps, in the other direction,
devising characters not so obscure,
whose minds one finds accessible, less murky,
people whose reality one believes in,
for whom to be discrete (oh, your discretion)
is least of their concerns, preoccupations,
their motives, if not understandable,
explainable, made palpable, fleshed out?
You must, I beg you, no longer be tempted,
as you have been tempted, to undertake

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exploration of that whole realm of shadows
you have been drawn to in such

I break off here.
Night has fallen; the old unease returns,
keeping quite scrupulously to its schedule.
(More, much more, than the dark comes down here, Harry).
Agassiz' secretary has, I fear,
grown weary, after all he has been put through
this afternoon. Nothing I might have said here
diminishes, I hasten to assure you,
the high regard in which I hold you nor
the considerable importance to me
of your gift of solicitude, a rare gift,
and my sense of its presence in my life,
this for now sightless life. You might spare Mother
and Father the details of which I write.
They know simply (simply!) I have been blinded,
a blindness free, or so they trust, of pain.
(Would that I could believe, or claim, the same.)
That is enough. (Discretion, as I said,
is what you were born to.) Convey to Alice
her brother's deep, deepest, affection,
Willie

—Herbert Morris

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Art

Houses, fields, gardens, hills

by Jed Perl

When one goes to a couple of dozen gallery shows a week, as I have been doing over the past months, the rush of images and the effort to adjust one's eyes and mind to very different kinds of art can be overwhelming. Sometimes I'm not sure I'm actually responding to the work and suspect my general mood is getting in the way of what I see in front of me. Some days all sorts of things look good; other days, when the first few shows are a downer, I start to approach everything skeptically. Often I leave a gallery feeling uncertain about what I've seen, and in these cases I find that one of the most useful tests is whether the work holds in my mind's eye. Some art feels intriguing when I'm in front of it, but ten minutes after I leave the gallery it's gone from my mind—I can barely recall what it looked like. Other shows—like the exhibition of new sculpture by William Tucker at the David McKee Gallery (which was reviewed in this magazine last month)—make me feel uneasy when I'm in the gallery, but stay with me afterwards. The shows I remember and play over three hours or three days after I've seen them are the ones I'm interested in. They're the shows that make me feel I've been opened up to a new experience. What follows are impressions of three recent painting shows that have stayed with me—and of one show, the Jennifer Bartlett retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, that left me with about as much of an impression as a soap bubble after it's burst.

Many people with a good eye for painting find Catherine Murphy's pictures—which were shown at Xavier Fourcade in December—hopelessly inept. And I do see their point. Murphy, who paints detailed views of her home and neighborhood in the suburban Northeast, doesn't have much feeling for the medium. Every object in her pictures is stained a uniform, brownish gray: it's as if you're seeing the world through a dirty window. Murphy doesn't use tones to place objects spatially, and she can't get a rhythm going with her colors. I also find something depressing about her subjects. I've no particular desire to visit—even in my imagination—these ordinary Middle American homes, with their rooms full of worn-out, unappealing scraps of furniture. I look at these paintings and I'm more than a bit turned off by them, and yet there's something in the meticulous way Murphy goes about making a painting that I can't but enjoy. Every once in a while Catherine Murphy comes up with something that really sticks in my mind.

Murphy is an obsessive compulsive who wants to record each wrinkle of her everyday world. She'd like to include each leaf on the tree, each flower on the wallpaper—and she comes damn near doing it. What you feel in her work is a mind that's trying to figure out how these micro-herculean tasks can be accomplished. There's a ponderous side to Murphy's art—she seems weighed down by all she has to describe—but we stay inter-

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ested because she's such an able technician. It's satisfying to watch Murphy working through a scene. She doesn't give you the general feeling of detail and then just sketch in a shadow; if she's painting a shadow, she shows us exactly how fuzzy the edges are and where the pool of dark lets in a sprinkle of light. All the details in a Murphy are given equal importance: the grain in the wood, the glint of light on a doorknob, the little cracks and discolorations on the walls are confronted head on. After you've looked at a Murphy, you know exactly how the scene would look under a microscope. Everything about the technique is dependable, predictable. Murphy can't turn naturalistic detail into poetry; she offers something like the flat, well-wrought prose of the naturalistic novel. She has an intelligent eye.

The strongest painting in Murphy's recent show—and probably the best painting she's ever done—is *Cellar Light.* This roughly three-by-four-foot horizontal canvas sets us down in the main-floor hallway of a modest home and makes us feel we're at the nerve center of the domestic scene. Right in front of us, through the open cellar door, is a flight of steep basement stairs; to the left is the neat, unprepossessing kitchen; down the hall to the right there's the front entrance, a window, and a glimpse of a sunshiney, green-and-blue day. The painting is a triptych-in-one, with the different atmospheres of three domestic realms lovingly described. The pleasure here is in studying how a house works. In your imagination you can walk in the front door, up the stairs to the second floor. You can scrutinize the wallpaper in the hall, think of walking into the kitchen to turn on the kettle for some coffee. Above the cellar stairs a bare bulb burns and we observe, bathed in an electric glow, the somewhat rundown look of the basement. Down in the cellar, there's a small surprise: a triangular scrap of window through which we get another little vista of green. We didn't expect a window in the basement. It's as if Murphy is announcing, with a small note of triumph: "You see, we even have a window down there." In *Cellar Light* there's an authority to Murphy's approach; she's become a self-assured narrator of domestic manners. The painting has the same authority as Eastman Johnson's *Not at Home,* a late nineteenth-century American painting which shows the entry hall and parlor of a comfortable Victorian home. Though the Johnson is more of a traditional genre scene—we glimpse a figure rushing up the stairs to avoid the guests—both paintings are quietly, insistently documentary. These aren't great paintings, but they're craftsmanlike, and they're made to last.

Murphy doesn't often reach the level of *Cellar Light,* and it seems that when she gets into trouble with a painting she lacks the flexibility to reconsider her basic assumptions—she just works it through to the end. The systems of perspective and human proportion in which classical figure art was always grounded are quite beyond Murphy's grasp; she's an instinctive, untutored realist. *Bedside Still Life,* which began with the interesting idea of showing all the bottles and packages on a windowsill in worrisome detail, is flawed by the too-close perspective Murphy has adopted. The top of the windowsill and the night table, instead of sitting comfortably into a normative space, rise up disconcertingly and give the canvas a flattened-out modernist feeling that's at odds with the minutiae of the description. Murphy isn't much of a conceptual thinker, and since she always tends to approach forms from the outside—from the direct evidence of what she sees—she's totally out of her element with the intricate infrastructure of the human form. Her people look at once frozen and flaccid—like bad sculpture.

Murphy's failures, like her successes, feel carefully considered and yet somehow naïve. In one self-portrait she has the rather curious idea of painting her image reflected in a window. It's nighttime, and dark except for the brilliantly illuminated white steps and exterior of a house outside. This is an odd, murky image, and I can see why Murphy was attracted to the motif. As a painting, *Nighttime Self-Portrait* turns out to

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be so black as to be unreadable: mostly what one registers is the grain of the canvas. (I wonder why Murphy doesn't use a finer grain of linen—or paint on wood panels.) But if the painting isn't a success, it still has an intensity that reminds me a bit of the crazily detailed atmosphere in German Romantic painters like Philipp Otto Runge. *Nighttime Self-Portrait* is the work of an artist who believes we can be surprised by the most ordinary things in the world. I agree with her.

Part of what I liked about Murphy's show was that everything didn't look the same. There were still lifes, interiors, landscapes, figure groups, self-portraits—and it felt as if Murphy was trying to respond to each motif on its own, unique terms. When an artist exhibits two or three different kinds of paintings, even if you only like a few of them, you leave the show eager to visit the artist's next one: you don't feel a career has gone onto automatic pilot.

I felt the willingness to question, doubt, and break through to something new in Joan Snyder's exhibition at Hirschl and Adler Modern last October. Snyder showed at least two different kinds of paintings which really didn't go together, and I think an artist who is, like Snyder, pretty well known should be given credit for having the courage to show her confusion in public. Snyder's most ambitious and weakest works are her compartmentalized, storytelling abstractions. These canvases are organized into many roughly rectangular areas: sometimes a series of small compartments form a border around a larger, central area; at other times the compartments are lined up in rows. The canvases are filled with dissonant colors and all manner of impastoed brushwork, with images (a house, a tree, a figure, a boat) and inscriptions. The titles are often grandiose—*Apple Tree Mass, My Pain is no More than Being's Pain*; it sounds as if Snyder is taking on the world. Where the paintings contain words or lines of poetry, these have an apocalyptic fever. In *Apple Tree Mass* we read that "Our children are being kidnapped and raped/going crazy/wandering the streets, committing suicide."

Snyder seems to envision abstract painting as a modern equivalent of the decorations on the walls of an Egyptian tomb. She wants abstract art to contain a good deal of human experience; she wants these pictures to function as a permanent record of current events—a testament of the times. In the complex structures of these canvases, Snyder is obviously reaching toward classical European metaphoric abstraction: toward Paul Klee's *Around the Fish* and *Fish Magic,* Kandinsky's Paris period, Miro's paintings of the late 1920s and the pictograms of Joaquín Torres-García. These European works are all brilliant graphic inventions; as Klee explained so elegantly in the "Creative Credo" of 1920, line becomes the guiding force in the creation of a new pictorial world. Snyder's abstractions don't really connect to this tradition, because they lack the graphic dimension. Snyder doesn't seem capable of plotting out her world; she can't give us even the outlines of a new universe. Her pictograms don't resonate, and when she includes words the calligraphy doesn't have the force of good drawing—it's scrabbly, like the handwriting on a shopping list. These abstractions are raw in a bad way. The emotions haven't been turned into memorable images, and the artist's attitudes end up looking overblown.

From the dating of the works in Snyder's show, it seems that the complex abstractions were mostly finished in 1983 and 1984, and that in 1985, roughly a year before the show, Snyder turned toward a simpler kind of motif. There were in the Hirschl and Adler Modern show about half a dozen paintings on the theme of a field seen or imagined in various seasons of the year, and this uncomplicated subject seems to have released something in Joan Snyder. The motif—a piece of land with row-like divisions that suggest a tilled field—presents an unexceptional, rural view; but there's also a joke here, because of course the idea of a field echoes the fields of postwar abstraction. Snyder's landscapes run pretty much parallel

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to the picture plane; there's a certain sense that as you move up the painting you're moving back into space, but this is the shuffling, slow perspective of Oriental art rather than the swift rush of European space. What's pleasing in the field paintings is the range of effects Snyder achieves. The key picture—the horizontal, six-by-twelve-foot *Beanfield with Music*—is composed of perhaps a half dozen lustrous, high-keyed greens which are dragged, dabbed, and scraped in rough blocks across an underlying golden yellow tone. Hans Hofmann has always seemed to be an influence on Snyder, but only here does Snyder capture some of the sense of paint as a metaphor of nature that infuses the best Hofmanns. Nothing in *Beanfield with Music* is forced; the appearance of purple vertical bars here and there, and the roughly drawn rows of Y shapes that represent little plants (and also, given the title, perhaps musical notes) feel like a series of independent, interesting decisions. *Beanfield with Music* is like a giant version of Paul Klee's little green world, *Pastorale*; and if Snyder adds nothing new to the Klee, I also think it's no small compliment to say she isn't shamed by the comparison.

The field paintings are most effective when they're largest. The smaller ones, such as *Beanfield with Mud* (34" x 52") can feel overly elegant, perhaps because they don't encircle us. But what I like in all of these pictures is the variety of the strokes, the sense of surprise. In *Beanfield with Snow* the white impasto is smeared and mussed up with purple and blue and green: a fine, affecting analogy to slightly dirtied snow. In *Field in June* the grays, deep green, and purples feel selected one by one, and the variations in paint handling and brush direction make of the canvas an intriguing fabric. Like the very best Gustons—the ones from right around 1950—these pictures are eloquent about the experience of paint.

Jennifer Bartlett—whose retrospective was on view at the Brooklyn Museum through early January—doesn't offer us the delight of brilliant brushwork. In her fifteen-year career she's painted in many different ways, but the element of surprise isn't there—she's just covering ground. Bartlett rips through projects and styles and media, and it's not especially surprising that she's even tried her hand at a novel. *History of the Universe* is a roman a clef,[1] and I'd recommend the section on "Friends" to anyone who wants to understand the SoHo mentality, because Bartlett gets the SoHo combination of knowingness and nerdiness down to perfection. Though in brief quotation her prose can sound tongue-in-cheek, in *History of the Universe* she keeps her clipped, dry-as-dust diction going for two hundred pages and you can't help feeling she's taking herself seriously. Here is a description of one of the friends: "He visited New York, worked for Sandy Newman, met major American artists, returned to London, exhibited his own work, taught, fell in love often, was the object of others' love, entertained, went to movies, plays, ballets, parties, painted, became a resident of King's College, Cambridge, restored a room designed originally by Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, formed people's taste, dressed with verve . . . ." And here is Bartlett's description of an artist in crisis: "He is concerned that the interest in his art is losing momentum, that he is losing momentum, he takes some coke, works twenty-four hours trying to decide in which direction to push his work." I like the "trying to decide in which direction to push his work." I don't imagine anyone who had done a real work of art would ever describe the process that way; but I'm convinced this is how Bartlett sees it. Her retrospective is a history of tactical maneuvers.

Bartlett's career began with paintings done in Testors hobby enamel (the kind that comes in little jars) on groups of one-foot-square white enameled steel plates. I can't imagine a combination of elements with less potential. Bartlett's enamel paints, with their viscous, gluey consistency, can't really be manipulated by the artist, and her enameled

1 *History of the Universe,* by Jennifer Bartlett; Moyer Bell Limited/Nimbus Books, 197 pages, $15.95.

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plates are so slick as to repel anything that tries to settle on them. The paint and the support don't merge; they don't form a pictorial unity. In the early 1970s Bartlett painted bunches of dots in regular patterns on her white plates. They look like patterns on a computer screen, and the ideas—take a form and turn it on its side, etc.—aren't so much simple as dumb. Bartlett's motifs are maze-like, and neither here, in her Minimalist phase, nor later, in her various painterly phases, does she manage to break through a structure or open it up. She just does a bit of this and a bit of that and then moves on. The critic Roberta Smith has described the large-scale works Bartlett does for her own pleasure as "self-commissions," and though Smith doesn't mean it pejoratively, the term expresses nicely the robot-like impersonality of Bartlett's career. I never feel this artist is on a journey of discovery.

Rhapsody—first shown at Paula Cooper's gallery in SoHo in 1976—takes the enamel-plate technique to billboard proportions. Wrapped around four walls of a room at the Brooklyn Museum, *Rhapsody*—with its combination of abstract and representational forms, with its hundreds of dots and dashes and dozens of trees and houses—struck me as a work that hardly existed in the realm of the visual. Not only is the enamel-paint-on-enamel-plate technique a dud, but Bartlett's idea of hanging individual panels mostly with a space of an inch or so between them destroys any sense one might get of the work as a whole. I don't like the way Bartlett shows off her cleverness. In one area of *Rhapsody* she takes a group of fourteen panels and paints fourteen different versions of a mountain. She includes here parodies of nineteenth-century painting, of Kandinsky, of Malevich—but I don't feel any significant flow between the different scenes. While the parodies prove to us that Bartlett knows some art history, we're left in the dark as to what she feels about any of the artists she burlesques. These mountain variations are a come-on, and they're also a tease: when you try to respond to them as pieces of painting, you realize they're just smug little exercises rattled off at machine-gun speed. *Rhapsody* was, by the artist's own admission, knocked off as fast as possible; Bartlett didn't even see the work all together until after it was installed, and it has the feel of a quickie job. Rhapsody is super-graphics dolled up to look like art.

Bartlett's evolution since *Rhapsody* mixes flippancy and grandiosity in a peculiarly unnerving way. In 1978 she embarked on a series of works called "Swimmers." Here the key image is an oval which for some reason, unfathomable to me, is supposed to represent a swimming figure. The "Swimmers" come in all manner of sizes and shapes. Bartlett isn't averse to pairing canvases of different sizes, or surrounding a rectangular canvas with a bevy of floating oval canvases. These arrangements are numbingly arbitrary when you see them in person; there's no way for a viewer to get oriented. It's all artsy and airless—a Dadaist pastiche of serious painting—but it sure does keep us guessing.

In the group of almost two hundred drawings of the swimming pool of a villa in Nice called "In the Garden" (they were shown together at Paula Cooper in 1981) the slapstick, improvisational routines which are at the heart of Bartlett's career reach a culmination. Here Bartlett parodies everybody—Van Gogh, Dufy, Diebenkorn, you name it—but she's such an inept draftsman that she makes me just want to run out of the room. It's offensive, seeing these klutzy scribbles in the same galleries where, in years past, we've looked at the Brooklyn Museum's fine collection of nineteenth-century European paintings. To go from Corot to this makes the mind blank out.

After the drawings in the show you've got two more Jennifer Bartlett transformations to get through. There's her appearance, in the early 1980s, as a bad painterly representational painter. Only a public which has never bothered to look at all the superb painterly painting around today (too old-fashioned for them) could be fooled by this photo-derived junk. And then, in 1985, there's Bartlett's move into three dimensions. The rotunda through which one

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entered the retrospective is littered with Bartlett's new work. Let it be recorded that there were boats and houses decorated in a pattern of plaid and constructed of glass, wood, metal, concrete—the list of materials goes on and on.

I always find Jennifer Bartlett's shows peculiar experiences. I have the sense that most visitors to her exhibitions are really feeling lost; you never see people locking into a painting—they just bob through, glad to be participating in a blue-chip cultural experience. I don't think Bartlett's work is meant to be looked at; it's just fodder for the art magazines and the corporate collections. Like all the recent superstars, Bartlett presents a problem for the critic. The proper job of the reviewer nowadays is to register minor reservations about the establishment heroes; critics are here to prove we don't accept the dealers' creations wholesale. It's fashionable to say Bartlett has had her ups and downs, but to return from Brooklyn and say there was nothing there is in a sense to exclude oneself from critical discourse. How can something so written about be so worthless? The writer who says this is defining himself as a kook—and I certainly don't want to get that reputation. I have a painter friend who argues that there's no point in writing about an artist like Bartlett. My friend's theory is that no matter what you say it just ends up as more copy, more square inches of glorification. I think she's got a point. To criticize Jennifer Bartlett is to acknowledge the existence of something that, from an aesthetic point of view, doesn't really exist. And yet to ignore Bartlett is to leave yourself open to the accusation that you're living in a dream world. I'm not really sure what the answer is. But if taking Jennifer Bartlett seriously is a prerequisite to critical sanity, I'll gladly sign myself into the loony bin.

When I wrote an article about Raoul Dufy for *Arts Magazine* in 1978, even the people at the Perls Gallery, which had always handled Dufy's work, were shocked the piece was going to be published. Now hardly a day goes by when I don't see the word "Dufyesque" somewhere in print. At Jaap Rietman, the art bookstore in SoHo, they can't keep copies of the catalogue of the 1983 Dufy retrospective, which was at the Hayward Gallery in London, on the shelves. They practically walk out of the shop. But Jennifer Bartlett, Kim MacConnel, David Hockney and (now, I gather) Roy Lichtenstein, don't embody the spirit of Dufy—they do impersonations of his style. They take Dufy for an artist with a clever pose, when really the distinctive look of his work represents a fluid response to the things he saw around him. I wish more attention was focused on the many younger artists who are working in the same tradition as Dufy—who are working through the problems Dufy worked through.

Esti Dunow, whose landscapes of Central America were shown at the Bowery Gallery in October, combines pictorial intelligence and painterly ease in a way that's truly Dufyesque; she's working in a tradition that includes not only Dufy, but also Marquet, Vlaminck, Derain, and non-French artists such as Soutine, Nolde, and Kokoschka. Dunow's show was rather overhung, and there were a few paintings of parents and children—what I imagine are family portraits—that seemed uncertain and almost feeble. These figures made up perhaps twenty percent of the show; the other eighty percent was made up of bright Mexican and Guatamalan landscapes, all done on canvases of either 30" by 34" or 32" by 36", and these I found very moving. Dunow has discovered, within her mountainous rural motifs, a distinctive rhythmic flow. Her panoramic, cloudless summertime vistas are often tilted slightly forward, and the journey the eye takes through them has a snake-like, sensuously undulating feel. We're not rushed through—we're visiting down South and we're encouraged to take our time. The rhythm isn't sluggish, but the tempos are, though pleasant, slightly lazy.

Dunow's colors, which tend toward the posterish or folk artish, help to underline these meandering journeys. When the land-

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scapes don't come off, it's because the rhythms, carried through in dark blue-green and purple tones, become overly dense—the paintings don't quite breathe. In some pictures one feels a certain abstract impulse taking over too much: the effects get obvious, and the way Dunow will reduce a row of trees to a couple of darkish and lightish blobs seems overly simplistic. But in many of these landscapes the little incidents of trees and roads and stucco buildings dotting the hills create a series of piquant, distinct stop-offs within the overall arabesque. The color opens up: there are fields painted in a rosy terra-cotta, others in a pale spring green. You begin to get caught up in the back and forth of paint into nature and nature into paint, and you can enjoy how Dunow pulls you back and forth a couple of times within one painting. The alterations of handling and of inflection give you a sense of an intelligence experiencing the world.

In a number of the landscapes Dunow juxtaposes distant hills with a big Spanish Colonial Rococo façade or tower, and the way the rhythms of the landscape echo the curves of the architecture gives a clue to the meaning Central America must hold for Esti Dunow. Central America has perhaps the richest visual arts tradition in the New World. Since the time of the Mayans, Central American art has had an almost Oriental elaborateness of decoration; Spanish Rococo is larger, bolder, and gaudier than the European variety. There's a special propulsive feel to the arabesques, which carries over into all the extraordinary contemporary folk crafts of the area. Against the stripped-down visual traditions of Northeastern America, Central America offers a wonderful visual richness that attracts many artists—Dunow among them—to the area. There's a decorativeness to the surfaces of all Dunow's paintings—they have some of the brashness of Mexican tiles. And in the paintings where architecture blends with landscape, I feel a happy marriage of nature, culture, and art.

Dunow's paintings have an effortless, almost naïve surface; but the more one thinks about them, the more it's clear they reflect a fairly complicated sense of the world and the artist in the world. In the paintings of hilly farmland the tilled fields—with their views of crops running this way and that like the weave of a basket—suggest how man bends to the will of nature. There's wisdom in the straightforward images—but the artist never forces her point. What sets Dunow so firmly within the French painterly tradition is her ability to give us the pleasure she has had and not burden us with the hard thought or hard work that's gone into creating such bright images. Today it takes something like bravery for an artist with brains to affirm the joy of paint before all else: this may be the toughest intellectual position to maintain when you live in an art world drunk on fake ideas. I saw Dunow's Central American views in the early fall, when the weather in New York was still temperate; as the mercury has dropped in the past couple of months her Mexican and Guatemalan scenes have held in memory, a souvenir of warmer and sunnier climes.

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Theater

Winter journey

by Mimi Kramer

If you stand in the crowded lobby of the Promenade Theatre at a little before eight almost any night this winter, you will probably see a straggling line of people who all look very unhappy. Some of them have been standing there since seven o'clock in the hope that a ticket to Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* may come free. If you glance across the lobby to where the reviews are posted, you may see that another group has unconsciously formed a second line. These people already have their tickets and are just biding time before going into the theater. Gazing respectfully at the wall, they might be congregated around a Rembrandt or a Titian; and they turn away from the reviews with that expressive mixture of exhilaration and content that people sometimes wear emerging from a concert hall or moving away from a painting in a museum. I've passed by the Promenade Theatre several times this season at about that hour: the scene is always the same. Which leads me to imagine it was taking place one evening in early December while a small crowd of people were demanding their money back at a theater some thirty blocks downtown.

The people in the lobby of the Samuel Beckett Theatre couldn't have looked more displeased. They had come to see Dina Merrill in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Dina Merrill wasn't playing that evening. An understudy, Peg Small, would be performing the role of Lady Bracknell because Dina Merrill was ill. Clustered around the window, making unreasonable and indignant comments, the angry patrons sounded a little like Lady Bracknell herself:

> . . . I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others . . . .

Perhaps they didn't know the play. At any rate, they weren't about to stay to see some nobody perform it. They got their money and stomped out of the theater in search of meeter entertainment. Had they stayed, they would have had the pleasure of seeing an almost perfect production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. And had they come back another evening, they would have found that the performance of the understudy far outshone that of the "star" she was replacing.

What was wrong with Dina Merrill's performance as Lady Bracknell was exactly what Walter Goodman said was wrong with it in *The New York Times*: she didn't know how to deliver the lines deadpan; she kept trying to help them along, putting in a little expression here, a little feeling there and—for spontaneity's sake—some naturalistic thought. Unfortunately, Lady Bracknell is probably the character in the play who can least stand up against this sort of treatment. She is not a naturalistic character, flesh and

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blood, but a sort of surrealistic construct. Lady Bracknell does not think and feel; she makes pronouncements, and the actress who plays her must be able to deliver them (as Peg Small did) as though she had no inkling of their absurdity. When Lady Bracknell delivers her disquisition on invalidism, for instance, it is not useful for her to be constantly checking up on Algernon's reaction to what she is saying, eliciting signs of agreement. Sooner or later Algernon will have to give one (or else appear rude) and if Algernon nods or smiles understandingly at Lady Bracknell's wonderful idiocies, they will cease to be idiotic.

"I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance," Lady Bracknell declares. "Ignorance is like a delicate, exotic fruit: touch it and the bloom is gone." Dina Merrill read the line as though Lady Bracknell were a real person, groping for just the right analogy. ("Ignorance is like a . . . like a delicate exotic fruit . . . .") It is the same ill-advised approach to comedy of manners that blighted the production of *Hay Fever* at the Music Box Theatre this winter, in which Mia Dillon and Robert Joy were emoting all over the stage. Brian Murray's revival of the Coward play seems to have been conceived primarily as a "star" vehicle for Rosemary Harris. But Rosemary Harris is not an actress who needs a vehicle of any sort and the mind that could conceive that she does is the same mind that could think of casting Mia Dillon and Robert Joy in Noël Coward. Mia Dillon is a charming actress, but neither she nor Robert Joy has the least idea of how to perform light comedy. Into a line like "Oh, mother, do shut up," Mia Dillon pitches the vast agony of an existential despair—and ends up sounding like the girl in the old Anacin commercial: "Please, mother, I'd rather do it myself!"

Hay Fever is a play that consists almost entirely of throwaway lines. But they have to be tossed, not flung. "You look awfully dirty, Simon. What have you been doing?" asks Judith, on entering. "Not washing very much," comes the reply. It's got to be timed and tossed. But Robert Joy spent precious seconds having a good think about what he'd been doing recently, and the line was lost. Just so, in the Wilde play, with Dina Merrill trying to force all the authenticity she could muster into the role of Lady Bracknell, most of her lines fell flat.

Still, Philip Campanella's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was beautifully conceived and intelligently directed. It was interesting, moreover, in pointing up a key difference between Coward and Wilde, whom most of us, I expect, tend to lump together under the heading of Glib Superficial Comedy. If you were to attend the production of *Hay Fever* at the Music Box Theatre (which I don't recommend), you would probably leave observing that comedy of manners, in order to be well performed, must be performed almost expressionlessly. If you were to attend a performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (which unfortunately closed in late January), you would find that what holds true for Noël Coward does not necessarily hold true for Oscar Wilde.

A play like *Hay Fever* has to be performed completely deadpan because there aren't any real people in it. There is nothing in it at all but funny lines and style. Coward's comedy consists essentially in the spectacle of people being rude to each other very economically. The structure of Wilde's comedy is more complex than that: there is, beneath the witty, superficial dialogue, a serious subtext built on the tension created by surrealistic people doing absurd, unrealistic things (like advocating ignorance or spinning elaborate lies around fictional friends and relations) and the realistic context that the dramatic space always provides. In Algernon's rooms in Half Moon Street, "Ernest in town and Jack in the country" is just a joke, an occasion for verbal and philosophical farce. But removed to the context of John Worthing's own garden, where we can see his house, his position, and the people whom he has been deceiving all these years, the hero of Wilde's play takes on a more sinister aspect.

Noël Coward, though great fun, really is fundamentally vacuous; and the more vacu-

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ous his plays are, the more crucial becomes that toneless, glib style of performance without which the individual lines lose their kick. But in Oscar Wilde there is always something happening below the surface of the comedy. Accordingly, as the recent production suggested, Wilde's characters (with certain important exceptions) need not be played as pasteboard figures, mere mouthpieces for a series of verbal attitudes. In the Campanella production of *Earnest,* owing to a combination of good casting, good acting, and good direction, many of the play's most epigrammatic remarks ceased to be epigrams altogether—glib witticisms that would lose nothing by being delivered completely out of context. Playing Algernon, Anthony Fusco uttered sentiments and opinions not quite as though he had only just thought of them, as Dina Merrill was doing, but as if he had never before felt quite so strongly the need to express them. "My dear boy, I love hearing my relations abused," he said cordially, when Jack apologized for bad-mouthing Lady Bracknell to his face. And when he added, "Relations are simply a tedious pack of people who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die," he actually sounded a little surprised that Jack should not know this. This style of performance really does leave an audience speculating about a character's offstage life, so that when, toward the end of the first act, Algernon was left alone with his butler for a moment, we couldn't help wondering whether Lane had been Algy's bedmaker at Oxford or just an old family retainer of the Moncrieff's.

With actors like Anthony Fusco, Samuel Maupin, Cherry Jones, and Cynthia Dozier around, it becomes less and less understandable why productions like Brian Murray's revival of *Hay Fever* continue to be produced on Broadway. Still, performances like theirs are rare. Far more common is the style of performance that people are lining up to see at the Promenade Theatre, in which skill is superseded by a kind of onstage violence: by head-bashing or wall-banging or by screaming very loudly for a long period of time. This acting technique, which seems to confuse "acting" with "misbehaving," is fostered by the kind of portentous play (like the Shepard and like Lyle Kessler's *Orphans*) that portends nothing. Actors of the Theater of Portent school throw temper tantrums in moments of heightened passion. Thus, Terry Kinney, playing the more high-strung of the two brothers in *Orphans,* registers a high level of frustration by screaming very loudly and hitting himself rather hard with his fists for several minutes before falling onto the floor in a faint. Similarly, in Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind,* Harvey Keitel at one point hurls the contents of a bowl of pea soup into his bed in order to register irritation with his mother and does a frenetic little dance on the bed, marching double-time, so as to grind the soup angrily into the sheets. Later (much later) Will Patton, playing the brother of the wife that Harvey Keitel has battered to the point of brain damage and left for dead, simulates extreme moral indignation by crawling and writhing around on the floor, jumping up and down, bending over, holding his knees together, and drawing on the whole Actors Studio repertoire of funny walks. He does little foot things, picking one up and crimping it down again, knock-kneed. He seems to be trying to simulate a kind of insanity brought on by having to go to the bathroom very, very badly. Audiences have great respect for this sort of acting. It looks so very painful and unpleasant. All that exertion: screaming and getting hit.

The reigning queen of Theater of Portent acting is probably Amanda Plummer, who plays the brain-damaged wife of Harvey Keitel in *A Lie of the Mind.* Miss Plummer is an actress who specializes in portraying the crippled, the maimed, the mute, the depressed, and the deranged. She could no more play a normal person than I could play King Lear and it is an index of her capability as an artist that in her hands all of the unfortunates she portrays look very much the same. For whether she is "doing" Tennessee Williams's Laura or a hysterical nun in the

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throes of an imaginary childbirth, she has but this one party trick: the knack of suffering unattractively. Sam Shepard's play gives her an opportunity to do this on a grand scale. She shouts and mumbles and gesticulates incoherently. She imitates the action of the spastic and drags her useless legs about the stage like a veteran paraplegic. She behaves like a simpleton. Or a Mexican. ("You make an enemy in me. Is not for love. Is pride.") Or a weirdo. She even makes an entrance in ungainly make-up, looking just like Christopher Plummer in drag. All of this without managing to invoke the smallest smidgen of consistency or pathos.

Amanda Plummer may be worth comparing here with Mary Beth Hurt, who is giving such an astonishing performance this season as the wimpy, dependent, and inadvertantly exploitive Sheila in Michael Frayn's *Benefactors*. Both Plummer and Hurt are in a sense doing the same thing, playing roles that entail making themselves ugly and pathetic. And Mary Beth Hurt, on the stage of the Brooks Atkinson Theater, does such a good job of whining and giggling foolishly, shuffling, slinking, and mooching around that she is in danger of stealing the show. But Mary Beth Hurt is such a consummate artist that she seems almost to rebuff the audience when she feels it moving toward her. Instead of playing to the audience—as a ham would do—she pulls back and adjusts the level of her performance as though realizing that it would throw the whole play off balance for the character she is playing to steal the show. Which is a mark of extraordinary integrity. Amanda Plummer, by contrast, is desperately trying to steal Sam Shepard's show. And Shepard's play is a show that desperately wants stealing. But Plummer—with all her acrobatic symptoms—cannot accomplish even this. Mary Beth Hurt really is doing something difficult, something that goes against the grain of an actor's narcissism. But all that Amanda Plummer's performance requires of her is energy and all it produces, ultimately, is itself, its only virtue being, perhaps, that it is describable.

To the cast of *The Importance of Being Earnest,* acting means filling a dramatic space by defining a specific pattern of behavior as characteristic of a specific individual. But Amanda Plummer's brand of acting comes out of a dramatic vacuum rather than filling one. Like the style of acting called for by the most superficial drawing-room comedy, the Theater of Portent school of performance is produced by the kinds of plays in which there is so little happening in the way of language or ideas that the actor has to bear the whole burden of keeping us entertained. By throwing soup into the bed. Which is, in the end, the joke about Shepard, I suppose: his superficiality. All those weighty, "mythic" monologues and ponderous oracular images; the portentous lighting cues: it all amounts to very little. They are the 1980s version of Noël Coward or Maxwell Anderson—a form of entertainment that keeps the swells off the streets and the pseuds happy with an idealized portrait of their own culture and society. Not that there's anything wrong with this. Personally, I rather like Sam Shepard's vision of America with its non-specifically-referential American flags, its Mexican highways and endless tracts of desert full of men who can't help leaving the women who love them and women who can't help loving the men who abuse them. But it is about as profound as a Grateful Dead lyric. I remember the Grateful Dead very fondly—Bob Weir, Jerry Garcia, and Robert Hunter—but I can do something else while I listen to them, like whittle or sew a button on my coat. They don't take up four hours of my time and thirty-five bucks of my hard-earned wages. Nothing that Shepard has to offer us in *A Lie of the Mind* seems to justify the claim it makes on our time, money, and attention. It might be better (because more economically) expressed in some other form—a photograph or song. Or a review.

"Is there," Bob Weir used to wonder, "anything a man don't stand to lose,/When the devil wants to take it all away?" They are selling *Lie of the Mind* tee shirts in the vestibule of the Promenade Theatre. But if Sam

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Shepard has become a commodity, that is partly, I think, because his work, like that of Amanda Plummer, has the single, solid virtue of being media-friendly. And media-friendly in a way that no really good art ever is. No discussion of *The Importance of Being Earnest* could ever do justice to either the play or a performance of it. The play cannot be analyzed, recorded, or filmed in such a way as to produce the experience one has seeing the play on a stage. (And *The Importance of Being Earnest* has been well filmed, well analyzed, and well recorded.) You have to see Wilde's characters realized in a dramatic context, in a static space, in order to appreciate the grim comment on society that he is making underneath the pleasant burble of trivial conversation. But Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* is really much better off being described or written about than experienced in the theater. His is a variety of art that, like the kind of acting it calls for, essentially produces wonderful copy and little else. Which explains the expression on the faces of the people reading through the reviews in the lobby of the Promenade. They've had their catharsis before going into the theater. It's only reviewers who look catharsed coming out.

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Dance

The trouble with Robbins

by David Daniel

Jerome Robbins's *In Memory Of . . .* to the music of Alban Berg's violin concerto is back in New York City Ballet's repertory this season at the State Theater after being shown for only five performances last spring. Its premiere on June 13, 1985, marked the first time that Robbins has made a ballet for Suzanne Farrell, and it is a singular event for several other reasons. Robbins is now, with Peter Martins, Ballet Master in Chief of New York City Ballet. He has for decades been one of the most renowned choreographers in the world, a reputation he earned on his own, not one he gained by default on Balanchine's death. (Balanchine was never as famous as Robbins.) His wide notice came from his work in now legendary hit Broadway shows like *The King and I, Fiddler on the Roof, West Side Story,* and *Gypsy.* Even though the world of ballet is infinitely smaller than the worlds of musical theater and the movies, Robbins's reputation as a ballet choreographer was never small; it started big and grew. We mainly know Farrell from her work with Balanchine, although she has always danced works mounted for her by the company's other choreographers, including John Taras, Jacques d'Amboise, and Stanley Williams. She has danced in many of Robbins's other ballets, and has even danced the first performance of one (*In G Major,* with Peter Martins), although it was not written for her and Martins but for Sara Leland and Bart Cook. She and Martins also gave the NYCB premiere of Robbins's *Other Dances,* a duet he arranged for Natalia Makarova and Mikhail Baryshnikov that was first shown at a benefit performance for the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library and later went into the repertory of American Ballet Theatre. But Farrell has never before appeared in a work made expressly for her by Robbins.

If you've ever seen ballets from the Forties like Agnes de Mille's *Fall River Legend* or Léonide Massine's *Aleko,* it is not hard to imagine that by contrast Robbins's early pieces must have seemed startingly natural. No wonder Balanchine encouraged his work, with its easy charm and lack of pretension. Robbins is musical, too, in a homey, immediate way, but he is no musician. His musicality is frozen at the level of a ten-year-old child who has just begun to hear the gravitational pull of a cadence or who has just intuitively understood that a wide interval in a melody, in order to be rhythmically persuasive, cannot also be metrically exact. Robbins has never revealed in his choreography a speck of understanding of how musical features add up to musical structure, but it's a limitation you can live with as long as he permits himself his natural response to music, which is where musicality begins anyway. When Robbins is least effective with a score it's as if he's showing you interesting bits in the wallpaper without ever letting you see how they add up to a design. At his most compelling, as in *Afternoon of a Faun* (Debussy), he clearly shows

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you the atmosphere this music conjures up for him. He largely ignores the structure of the *Faun* score, as Nijinsky did, which is all right because it is so lacking in a perceptible dance impetus. Yet when he animates the drama this music conveys to him, he creates a compelling scene of two dancers' unself-conscious, self-absorbed eroticism. There is a formal progress in this little drama; one action grows out of another in a logical, coherent succession.

But while Robbins is evidently aware that a dramatic action must be presented with formal intelligibility, he has never composed a ballet which shows he has heard that music, too, is built on formal logic. Just as drama is composed of actions and their complications and resolutions, so music is composed of figure, motive, counter-motive, phrase, counter-phrase, period, section, movement, and so on. But you'd never know it if your only exposure to music had been what you heard while watching Robbins's ballets. He seems unable to hear a sequence, for example, or any other piece of musical rhetoric, and show in a dance that it has a structural function. For him, a dissonance in Chopin is an opportunity to turn somebody upside down or sideways. Never mind that Chopin's dissonance may be simply a figure in a motivic development through which he arrives at an effect considerably larger than a mere dissonance. Robbins may choose to have a dancer run excitedly to a passage of sixteenth notes. Or he may choose to have her stand still while the music swirls around her. His idea of formal progress in *Goldberg Variations*—a seventy-minute work—is to have the dancers change clothes after dancing an interminable set of dances utterly unrelated to each other. (This may be Robbins's way of showing his independence from the received notion of "variation." It may also show that in music Robbins cannot clearly discern a functional feature of musical structure *or* its variation.) If he hears an intelligible relationship between note values and rhythmic pulse, it is a secret he has decided to keep to himself. This isn't musical construction. It is at best a series of anecdotal non sequiturs about surface events in music, whose sole virtue is the surprise of rhyme or coincidence. In the fifteen or more years since *Dances at a Gathering* and *Goldberg Variations* we've had ample opportunity to learn that there are even fewer returns to be got from a Robbins ballet once you've learned the music by heart. After all, how many coincidences can you stand—and still be surprised by them?

Robbins's dances for the popular theater are gracefully witty and uncontrived. It is in this "prose" music, as it were, of vernacular dance idioms that his ear and imagination work most happily. His dances for *West Side Story* are more than popular dances; they're little worlds. They remind you of all the newsreels you ever saw about the latest dance crazes, stacks of old *Life* magazines, and the big band radio shows. Music for today's popular theater is not music of the structural complexity of Chopin and Bach, and on hearing these scores Robbins doesn't become afflicted with the kind of Good Taste that overcomes him when he hears what he must think is "serious" music. I believe that Robbins doesn't take popular music seriously and doesn't feel obliged to bless it with his strained efforts. If this is so, it means that when Robbins allows us to see him at his best, he does so unwittingly.

Robbins had worked with NYCB from 1949 to 1956, but the Robbins Era at NYCB didn't begin until the appearance of *Dances at a Gathering,* the first ballet he produced after he returned to the company in the fall of 1968 following a twelve-year absence while working for Broadway and the movies. The popular success of *Dances* is one of the biggest in the history of the company, and he followed that with the immensely popular *In the Night, Goldberg Variations,* the controversial *Watermill,* and fourteen other ballets during the next six years. By the early Seventies, his successes had moved Clive Barnes (*The New York Times*), Alan Rich (*New York*), and Harold Schonberg (*Harper's*) to announce Balanchine's artistic demise. These writers implied that Balanchine should retire and turn over

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the company to Robbins's younger, more vibrant talent. Other writers were less subtle. Historic eras are often difficult, if not impossible, to mark precisely. But Robbins's heyday at NYCB can be delineated exactly. It began at the moment Farrell left the company in 1969. It was eclipsed momentarily by Balanchine's successes in the 1972 Stravinsky Festival, and with *Who Cares?* (1970) and *Coppélia* (1974). It ended in 1975, when Farrell returned to the company after a six-year absence, and Balanchine began to work with her again at an even higher level of inspiration than before. During the early Seventies, the company's brilliance was widely ascribed to Robbins alone. Now that he is its Ballet Master in Chief, he is simply the curator of his own, undistinguished corner of the repertory.

It is commonplace to say that the prevailing look of NYCB has been fashioned by Balanchine in Farrell's image, and it's true, but the remark barely scratches the surface, because her influence is so pervasive in the range and variety of its detail. The standard bare-eared, topknot hairdo of the company's women is the one that Farrell found most congenial to herself (and today constitutes part of the look of virtually every female ballet dancer in the world). Her gesture, as she runs, of parting the air as if she is swimming was first appropriated by women who noted that Balanchine liked its effect. Now it's a movement we see in dancers who never worked directly with him or are even aware of its origin in Farrell's personal manner; it's a part of the lexicon of company style. Balanchine had begun to exploit the hugeness and speed of her "dramatic coloratura" style as early as 1962. By the time the company moved into its larger, opera-house-size home at New York State Theater (nearly double the size of City Center) in 1964, he had recast the scale of the company's style after the manner of Farrell. The meeting of Farrell and Balanchine was serendipitous. There can be little doubt that with her facility, musicianship, and beauty she would have made a success no matter with whom she had chosen to work. And Balanchine's reputation as a giant would be no less than it is today had he not composed another ballet after his 1957 *Agon*. Before meeting Farrell in 1960, Balanchine had worked with some of the most talented female dancers of the century—Alexandra Danilova, Felia Doubrovska, Tamara Toumanova, Maria Tallchief, Melissa Hayden, Tanaquil LeClerq, Violette Verdy, Diana Adams, Allegra Kent, Patricia McBride—these are just a few. With each of these women he refined her natural gifts and encouraged her to expand her range of expression to whatever limit she was willing or able to achieve. By the time he began to work with Farrell, in the last quarter of his life, he had amassed an immense and diverse literature for the ballerina. Because of Farrell's archetypal looks and physique no less than her unique musical gifts, Balanchine was able to consolidate in a single dancer the multiplicity of dramatic possibilities he had invented for the ballerina. In Farrell, Balanchine had a dancer who could—and did—dance virtually everything. (During her first year's absence from the company, her roles were divided among nine women.) Besides their work in his extant repertory, they collaborated in some two dozen other new ballets and rescensions of older work. The further innovations in ballet technique divined by them in these pieces have by now passed into the daily canon of the classroom. This is to say that Farrell's triumphs are not solely personal and idiosyncratic, although they are certainly that, too. Her work has entered, and transformed, the art of ballet itself. The company's most visible dancer, dancing at the peak of her authority for the past decade, she has led NYCB into the full glare of its current fame as the foremost ballet company in the world. It is a glare, I might add, that the company has not only been able to withstand, but under which it has flourished without shedding a particle of its refined, cold elegance. One would be hard put to name a more influential dancer in the history of ballet.

Among the changes in the complexion of ballet that Farrell has affected through her

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work with Balanchine are: (a) a quantitative increase in the amount of time a woman is on the stage at a single stretch, and (b) the density of what she does while she's there. (Before Farrell, many ballerina roles were composed largely of what could be thought of as sprints.) In *Meditation,* the first ballet Balanchine wrote for her, he brings her onstage not to leave until seconds before the very end, a statement so literal about her impact as a dancer that we can read it as prophecy. Her pas de deux in *Diamonds* is nearly double the length of the famous one in Act II of the Petipa/Ivanov *Swan Lake.* By the time of *Vienna Waltzes,* some ten years later, Balanchine shows what you have to do if you let Farrell leave the stage: the chandeliers burst into flame and fifty dancers, the men in tails, the women in white *peau de soie* gowns, rush in, waltzing headlong across the ballroom. In *Mozartiana* she dances a solo, four variations, a pas de deux, and a coda. It is a role of surpassing virtuosity, as physically arduous as it is rhythmically taxing.

Balanchine wanted for years to stage a ballet for her to Berg's *Lulu* Suite, a piece the composer shaped out of his opera based on Wedekind's plays *Pandora's Box* and *Erdgeist.* It was to have been, Balanchine used to joke, a compendium of everything Farrell could do for as long as she could do it, and he was eager to see what she would bring to it that he hadn't yet imagined. The ballet's pretext was to have been the legend of Salomé—perhaps a modern, expressionist permutation of the woman whose power is expressed through dancing. In 1967 Balanchine began to talk to Robert Craft about preparing a score, but there were problems with it they couldn't solve. And other events intervened. Farrell and Balanchine's friendship began to go wrong. Balanchine lost interest in working, both as a teacher and a choreographer. The few new ballets he presented after *Jewels* in 1967 were largely unsuccessful; the rest were revivals of older works. Whether it is a meaningful or a mere coincidence, it is nevertheless a fact that this is when Robbins was invited to rejoin NYCB.

Robbins came back to the company in the fall of 1968 and immediately set to work on a new ballet—*Dances at a Gathering*—which was first shown at a gala preview on May 8, 1969, the night Farrell left the company, not to return until 1975. That was the season of Woodstock, "Bridge Over Troubled Waters," and "Let It Be." Across the plaza at the Met, hippies were snorting coke during *La Bayadère. Dances,* many observers agreed, stood for the sentiment of the hour. Furthermore, it was seen to imbue the times, not to mention ballet itself, with wit, warmth, and what's more, "relevance."

One of the most often heard stories about the preparation of *Dances at a Gathering* is how it grew from a small piece to a big one, and how, in the course of making it, Robbins called to rehearsal nearly every dancer in the company before finally settling (was it the night before the performance?) on five couples. It is by no means unusual that a new ballet will not use every dancer—or even every principal dancer—in a company. But it was unusual for Farrell not to have been rehearsed or cast in a new ballet. The first performance of *Dances* marked the first time since 1963 that she did not appear in a new ballet on the night of a gala performance at NYCB. (She was, however, to have danced in the Adagio of Balanchine's *Symphony in C* that evening, the same ballet in which she would celebrate her return to the company.)

It is not clear why Robbins didn't use her. Perhaps he wanted to assert his unique profile within the company without relying on a star, an explanation that could hardly accommodate the presence in the ballet of Violette Verdy, Patricia McBride, or Edward Villella (who was then, with Rudolf Nureyev, the biggest international star in ballet.) Maybe he didn't want to step off on the wrong foot by working with a dancer who he thought was then in Balanchine's bad graces. (Even though relations between Farrell and Balanchine were strained, she continued to dominate his stage, dancing at almost every performance at least one and sometimes two ballets.) Or it could be that

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Robbins regarded Farrell as belonging to Balanchine in some special way. It is not clear, either, why years later Robbins did begin to cast her in his ballets, including *Dances.* He probably admires her dancing, but we may only guess at this. Over the years, he has told us less about his aesthetic aims than his method of stacking the odds in his favor.

Soon after rejoining NYCB, Farrell appeared in New York as a guest artist with Maurice Béjart's Ballet of the Twentieth Century, the company with which she'd spent the previous four years in Europe. She danced his *Bolero,* to the music of Ravel. It is a long (some twenty minutes), taxing work in the gamy chic style so favored by French choreographers of the Forties and Fifties. The ballerina is the only woman on the stage, and she's there for the entire ballet, dancing on a platform surrounded by some twenty men. Balanchine saw this performance and immediately revived the prospect of staging *Salomé.* "You'll have a beautiful costume, dear," he told her. "And maybe there will be some other people on the stage but nobody will dance except you." Balanchine prepared a piano reduction of the score and commissioned a set design from Rouben Ter-Arutunian. The project was well underway but had to be postponed because Balanchine's health had begun to fail. Later that same season, Robbins cast Farrell for her first performance of *The Cage,* his 1951 balletic essay on one of the more lurid aspects of female sexual pathology. When she wore the production's shiny black bobbed wig with bangs cut straight across the eyebrows, she looked like Louise Brooks in G. W. Pabst's movie *Pandora's Box.*

Of course artists steal, borrow, and appropriate from each other. I've often thought that had Balanchine been the first choreographer on earth he would've invented a history of ballet before feeling he could set to work seriously. But in Robbins's ballets the sight of what in another artist might be called "influence" is more apt to make you feel queasy than to fill you with awe in the

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presence of timeless harmonies. There is no such thing as a "Robbins dancer," one whom he has trained to demonstrate his personal style. He has customarily waited for Balanchine to discern a dancer's character, then proceeded to show her in variants of how Balanchine first presented her. Robbins does not merely appropriate the physical skills that Balanchine elicited in a dancer, but their entire dramatic resonance. If Balanchine cast a dancer against type, Robbins followed that too. In 1948 Balanchine cast the witty, mysterious, and musically gifted Tanaquil LeClerq, who many observers saw as the balletic icon of Dior's New Look, as the violent, flesh-rending Leader of the Bacchantes in his *Orpheus*. I find it likely that this is where Robbins got the idea of presenting LeClerq in *The Cage* as a member of a tribe of insect women who sting to death their male prey after mating with them. (He had originally created the role to exploit the adamant ferocity of Nora Kaye.) By the time Farrell danced her first Robbins ballet, in the May 1975 Ravel Festival, all the talk of her—and all you read—was of the new Farrell: her poise, her heightened sense of mystery, her purity of execution. Suddenly, in *In G Major,* it was as if we were seeing the Farrell of the Sixties—of Balanchine's *Clarinade, Ragtime,* and *Variations*—that is, the sexy, provocatively innocent child. Had she regressed? No. The ballet she was dancing was composed for Sara Leland, but at the last moment Robbins decided to present Farrell in its premiere. Leland was a handsome blonde woman, a speedy dancer whom Balanchine had used as a Farrell surrogate after Farrell left the company, casting her in Farrell's signature role of Dulcinea in *Don Quixote*. And now in 1975 Robbins had given Farrell choreography he had built out of another dancer's impression of what Farrell had done for Balanchine. It was as if you had to hold the ballet up to a mirror and read it backward to figure out what was going on. By the time of her return to the company Balanchine saw in Farrell the chthonic enchantress of *Tzigane*; Robbins saw Twiggy *sur la plage*. Up to a point it's easy to understand why Robbins didn't catch on to Farrell's stylistic range until after she had already developed in another direction. He wasn't around the company for most of the Sixties. When he came back all he had to look at was the residue of Farrell's influence on the company during a time when it was the most grievously misunderstood by dancers who no longer had Farrell before them as a model. Robbins had left the company in 1956, shortly after Tanaquil LeClerq fell ill with polio and was unable to continue her career. LeClerq was at that time the most important dancer in Balanchine's artistic and emotional life. She was, if you will, the Farrell of the Fifties (although, as Truman Capote has written, there's never two of anything).

My heart sank when I heard that Robbins was making a ballet for Farrell to Berg's violin concerto, which the composer wrote to commemorate the death of Alma Mahler's daughter, Manon Gropius, who died of polio at the age of nineteen. Robbins cannot resist converting the *Zeitgeist* into high-toned artifact. Since the Sixties he has given us radical chic, megalomania, demonic possession, "meaningful" adult relationships, and minimalism. One of his most recent ballets seems to take place in a health spa. And now a ballet for Suzanne Farrell called *In Memory Of* . . . . The ellipsis tells it all. The nearest to mystery this ballet comes is to raise the question of how something whose intent is so mercilessly clear can be so meaningless. While Robbins fails even to evoke the tone of the sentiment he apparently intends, which is surprising, the ballet is a triumph for Farrell, which isn't. When Robbins succeeds as a ballet choreographer, it is largely by capturing and hanging onto a sentiment or an atmosphere, even if it's one of nearly excruciating sensitivity. It is one of his few gifts. When that deserts him, as it has here, you're left with nothing but his arty pretenses. As for Farrell, at this point in her career she is so accomplished an artist that a dentist could bring her onstage for ten minutes' worth of anything she wanted

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to do, sign his name to the choreography, and wind up with a successful entertainment. And that is what Robbins has done. He has *in effect* signed his name to someone else's work, and has not even bothered to put it in a new frame.

Robbins has tricked out the ballet with a scenario he must have got from Berg's program for the 1935 concerto. In working out the action of the piece, Robbins seems to have forgotten (if he ever knew) that since music does not express anything but itself, a composer's program is mainly a formal device for working out his musical ideas (instead of using, say, a sonata allegro or dance suite form), but not necessarily a workable scenario for a choreographer to resuscitate by adding imagery to it the way you add water to dried soup mix.

Right from the start, the expressionist blear of David Mitchell's set painted in shades of dried blood leads you to expect the worst. A young woman in pink chiffon (Farrell) dances with her young man (Joseph Duell or Alexandre Proia); they seem to be in love and mostly happy. Friends arrive. There is a wistful party and some folksy foot-flexing. The friends and the young man leave. There is an intervention: a death-figure (Adam Lüders) enters and besets the girl. (In its emotional resonance, if not its choreography, this scene recalls the film Balanchine made for the March of Dimes in 1944, in which polio invades a ballet classroom and overcomes a young girl practicing at the barre. Balanchine played the role of Polio; LeClerq was the young girl.) She resists him heroically in a long, high-pitched pas de deux. Given the distance by which Farrell's technique, speed, strength, and stamina outmeasure Lüders's, one can only dimly imagine why, at the end of this dance, Farrell falls prostrate on the floor. It is even more inexplicable why now, having resisted him so valiantly and lengthily in the first place, she stands and embraces the death figure, nestling her head in the curve of his neck as he leads her offstage while the scene fades to black. Then to the strains of a woodwind chorale, gold and white light (by Jennifer Tipton) suffuses the view, and eventually our eyes focus on a host of men and women dressed in glistening white. Are we . . . in . . . paradise? Everyone here noodles about in lopsided arabesques with flung-back arms. Perhaps they're angels not yet adjusted to the new demands of balance wrought by the awful weight of their wings? Yes, we must be in heaven. For now Farrell appears, clad in a vapor of niveous silk, her loose hair flowing over her shoulders, looking as though she just stepped out of the Elysian Fields scene in Balanchine's *Chaconne*. As she comes downstage center, the angels form a circle and leave empty a front-and-center slot, awaiting, we believe, her final translation. She extends her arms to connect with the ends of the celestial arc, but before you can say "Ave verum corpus," who should walk in but her young man. Did he die in the wings? And the death-figure. When did *he* see the light? They lift Farrell from either side underneath her outstretched arms and walk her to the wings as she slowly makes striding motions with her legs. The curtain falls on an image of Farrell walking on air, grave as a statue of a saint in a procession. Where are they taking her? What, even the purest in heart may ask, lies beyond Elysium?

This drama is no sooner posited than it drops dead of its own vacuousness. But the ballet has a subject after all, and it is Farrell herself: her technique, her translucent, moth-like glamor, and her twenty years of work with Balanchine. You don't wonder why Robbins put her in this ballet the way you wonder why he cast Maria Calegari in *Glass Pieces,* a work containing nothing that requires a Calegari to demonstrate. Indeed, you can't help thinking that if it weren't for Farrell and the fact that Balanchine has written *Meditation, Don Quixote, Diamonds, Tzigane, Chaconne,* and *Walpurgisnacht Ballet* for her, there wouldn't be a ballet at all. She dances for Robbins as if he'd given her a masterpiece, never allowing herself to be seen as an objective commentator to the act she's engaged in, and sheds the ballet's obfuscations like so much cheap jewelry. To

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see her construct in its place another, real, drama is by no means to see a performer consume her own energy for public delectation. It is to see moral integrity in the flesh.

Robbins does not quote passages from these Balanchine ballets, but uses steps from them so utterly without transformation that the only values they express are those inhering in them from their original sources. Ballet steps, like words or notes in a scale, do not contain absolute values but potential relationships. It's their juxtaposition in a formal process that defines and shades them. Rameau, Gottschalk, and Boulez have all composed music out of the same twelve-tone scale. When Balanchine refers to Petipa, or Ashton to Pavlova, you can see that while the step has an author, it is also now part of a neutral vocabulary; and you can see that Balanchine or Ashton has given the step a new tint. But when Robbins uses Balanchine's material, except in self-conscious parody as in *The Concert,* it's as if you can still see Balanchine's fingerprints on it.

Occasionally Robbins makes explicit in a Balanchine/Farrell step what was before only hinted at, but even here he only turns up the volume. In a turned-in first position plié on point she sinks, supported, into grand plié and walks virtually on the knuckles of her feet while her thighs remain bent at right angles to the floor. And Robbins has raked her off-balance promenades more hellishly than we've ever seen. Otherwise, it's the Farrell we already know, dancing without a net. She folds herself into a sliver on the floor and unfurls into an unthinkably tilted arabesque penché. She is careened on one toe in Tilt-A-Whirl fashion till you're certain she'll be flung through the cyclorama, but she stops on a pin point and soars away in another direction. She steps into supported écarté, her back to us, and irridesces into arabesque effacé. Holding her partner's hand, she stands on a leg planted as securely as a tripod and cants her torso back and forth at the speed of a glacier melting, and even rolls it over to face the opposite direction. She turns triple pirouettes like a warm spatula swirling on a butter pat. We've seen her do all this before, but her prodigy reinvents it for us.

Both the virtue and failure of *In Memory Of . . .* devolve upon the directness and clarity with which Robbins presents Farrell in what we take to be her true self, *Balanchine's Farrell,* and exhibits her uncanny adagio strength in what may be the longest role she has ever danced. (Although we think of her as Balanchine's Farrell, there is no reason to believe she would do any less for another choreographer who gave her the same opportunities he did.) Despite the fact that Robbins has eschewed the opportunity to exploit in any novel way the technique of the woman who has most vividly altered the art of ballet dancing, he doesn't ask her to be less than herself, nor does he distort her, although he comes perilously close to it in the scene where she is beset by the death-figure. Farrell's fierce dignity does not permit self-imitation, or even repetition. Yet it is Robbins's delivery of her as a known quantity that makes the title's ellipsis tell you more than you want to know. You're watching a failure of imagination masquerading as a homage that never declares itself, yet begs to be taken as a metaphor not *necessarily* related to its original impetus. Which is to say that Robbins seems to want it both ways; the ballet is and isn't a memorial to anyone in particular. The result is that the ballet isn't even an ambiguous tease. It's a stageful of material waiting to be composed.

There is more than ample precedent in which one artist pays homage to another through use of the latter's form (Ravel to Couperin), literal use of material (Stravinsky to Pergolesi and Gesualdo), or transcription (Chopin, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky to Mozart). Schumann evokes Chopin in *Carnaval* without writing a single measure that could ever be mistaken for Chopin. Homage in art, when it is good, begins openly, in concrete fact, and transcends its occasion because it, too, is poetry—good poetry, that is. If you know the work of Farrell and Balanchine you know that Farrell's dancing is a poem to Balanchine. But you don't need to know it, because her dancing

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is also a poem to us, one that transcends its occasion. Robbins's ellipsis leads us to believe that he has left out only The Name and that each of us can write in that space whatever is in our hearts. But we get the reverse: the Name is named, and everything else is left out. The ellipsis suffocates us with its literalness.

I suspect that the success/failure duality as well as the double opacity through which we cannot discern whether this piece does or does not commemorate anyone in particular stems directly from an idea Robbins got from Berg's score. The "secret irony" of the violin concerto, as George Perle calls it, is that while Berg admittedly wrote it as a memorial to Manon Gropius, he also privately intended it as his own requiem. Robbins may have taken this to mean that music is capable of double meanings (at least). On that apprehension, he could have believed himself free to make a ballet about a young woman who dies, which could also represent a kind of memorial to Balanchine that wouldn't need to be explicitly stated. Of course this is a freedom Robbins already had, but it wasn't a license given him by Berg's score. Robbins defeats himself at the start because the literal level of his ballet does not really begin with "a young woman who . . ." but with Suzanne Farrell dancing for George Balanchine. Having begun at a level he cannot develop or transcend, his pretext (or perhaps his intended secret subtext) becomes the text itself. Berg succeeded with the irony in his concerto's dedication not because music admits of double meanings, but because it has none at all except those of itself. A concerto can be offered as a kind of memorial, but it cannot be anything except music. It's only because music means nothing but itself that we can have multiple experiences of it.

I don't think it's possible to come away from a Robbins ballet without seeing that music means a great deal to him; just *what* it means to him is something he has not yet revealed to us. His wish to be subtle leads him to posit mystery by leaving out the very details that would have led us to mystery. He reminds me of the writer to whom Flannery O'Connor wrote: . . . everything that has an explanation has to have it and the residue is Mystery." His tendency to mistake elision for understatement, when combined with his musical weaknesses, exposes him at every turn. He is not an adroit enough musician to ignore sequence, repetition, the bar line, and the development of a phrase. There is a history of ballet, and every choreographer has a personal history, so nearly all imagery comes from somewhere. Balanchine stole from everywhere, and Farrell has lifted effects from the showgirls at the Lido. But the difference between such artists and Robbins is that they possess the means to transform these random impressions into coherent patterns; they are musicians. I do not mean to fault Robbins for not possessing someone else's innate talents. No one was born with the skills I'm talking about; they are learned. But without any of these musical skills, and eschewing his dramatic ones, Robbins has little choice as an artist but to show us, in the rawest, most unshaded manner, the conflux of pictures in his brain that certain isolated passages of music evoke in him. There is nothing inherently base in Robbins's choice of imagery. It's just that because he does not transform it, reaffirm it, or even show us what it originally meant to him, his ballets often leave us with little except the unpleasant prospect of thinking the worst about his methods and his motives.

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Books

René Wellek: the theorist as historian

by James W. Tuttleton

With the publication of *English Criticism, 1900-1950* and *American Criticism, 1900-1950* —volumes five and six of his projected seven-volume *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950*[1]—René Wellek is nearing the end of one of the most impressive projects in the annals of American literary scholarship. (The seventh volume, *Continental Criticism, 1900-1950,* is tentatively scheduled to appear in 1988.) Something like the full dimension of his achievement in this history of modern criticism is becoming apparent to anyone who will study these new works in the context of the previous four volumes. Taken together, they constitute a comprehensive selection, organization, description, analysis, and evaluation of literary criticism in Europe and America in the indicated two centuries. Encyclopedic in its range of reference, judicious in its selection of critics, concise yet packed with information, and fair-minded but intellectually penetrating in its evaluations, Professor Wellek's work bids fair to stand as the definitive history of modern literary criticism in Europe and America. What does the present pair of volumes contain?

As the titles indicate, Wellek's subject here is the history of the practice of English and American literary critics in the first fifty years of the twentieth century. The dates are somewhat arbitrary, of course, but they seem justified by the contours of the material; and though the separation of critics by nationality may seem to obscure their intellectual interaction, this is not in fact the case. A single introduction is provided in Volume Five, and continual comparisons are made between the English and American critics. Parts of this history have already appeared, in Wellek's article-length treatments of particular critics and schools. But these volumes do not merely reprint Wellek's previous partial studies. There is much new material here, and each critic has been reconsidered.

In presenting these fifty years of English and American criticism, Wellek includes a generously full discussion of critical movements and schools—Naturalism, Symbolism, Impressionism, Marxist criticism, the New Humanism, the New Criticism, the Chicago Aristotelians, etc. In addition, whole chapters are devoted to major critics like T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, F. W. Bateson, William Empson; and, in America, Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, R. P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, Yvor Winters, and W. K. Wimsatt. Into his discussion of these movements and critics, Wellek interweaves an ongoing discussion of the meaning, to each of them, of major critical concepts like sincerity, didacticism, pleasure, the history

1 *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950*: Volume 5, *English Criticism, 1900-1950* (343 pages, $22.50); Volume 6, *American Criticism, 1900-1950* (345 pages, $22.50), published by Yale University Press.

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of ideas, the imagination, imagery, structure, texture, mimesis, metaphor, irony, paradox, myth, organic form, plot, point of view, symbolism, tragedy, and truth.

Criticism, for Wellek, is simply defined: it is "any discourse on literature." In characterizing this Anglo-American discourse, Wellek's method is to read all of the major relevant critical documents, to digest and summarize the critics' main positions, to connect their arguments with related positions, and to judge and rank the critics and schools in terms of their cogency, consistency, and historical importance. Wellek's presuppositions suggest that the historian of literary criticism must give doxographies of the material (that is, summaries and expositions of the doctrines of the critics), but that he must also maintain his own critical perspective. Wellek sees his work as elucidatory rather than polemical. Consequently, while he never (or rarely) becomes argumentative, he does subject their views to searching analysis. In this he differs from R. S. Crane, the Chicago Aristotelian, who called some years ago for "a chronological analysis of specific texts," for a "history without prior commitments as to what criticism is or ought to be," a history "without a thesis." For Wellek, such value-free historical analysis is "impossible to attain and undesirable." Hegel proposed that "Truth . . . has no history, is not past." Wellek concurs in arguing that there can therefore be no evolutionary history of critical performance; ancient critical formulations are significant today, to the extent that they elucidate a truth. Nor does he believe in the notion of changing critical paradigms—such as are suggested by Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*—or in the claims that a historical determinism shapes the history of literary criticism. The practice of criticism, for Wellek, arises in the freedom of the critic, who often arrives at his subject independently of what has gone before yet has his share in the unfolding of the truth that criticism can yield about literature.

Wellek's claim for the freedom of the critic accounts for the bias, in this history, toward treating critics as individuals rather than as members of a critical movement. He is reluctant to submerge their identities into the schools they are sometimes said to belong to. Where movements clearly exist—e.g., the New Criticism—Wellek is at pains to discriminate Ransom, Tate, Warren, Brooks, and Blackmur from each other and to point out where they diverge on key issues, thus giving to each credit for his individual accomplishment. (Quite rightly, he does not discuss any American women critics; none is of sufficient stature, in this period. Among the English critics, only Virginia Woolf gets a brief treatment in the chapter on the Bloomsbury group, one that she would not have wholly appreciated.)

Professor Wellek's encyclopedic knowledge makes it possible for him to indicate clearly how much of modern criticism is merely a rediscovery of old questions, often acclaimed as new, in ignorance of how the questions have already been addressed in the long history of literary criticism. Moreover, a part of the thinness of modern criticism arises from the Anglocentric perspective of our criticism. With his command of several languages and his comparatist perspective, Wellek is able to "place" the arguments of his critics in the widest context, invoking where relevant figures like Kant, the Schlegels, Croce, and other theorists and historians of literature.

But another part of the thinness of our literary criticism seems to inhere in the general Anglo-American aversion to technical philosophy and to the critical practice that may be founded upon it. Saintsbury condemned what he called the "error of wool-gathering after abstract questions of the nature and justification of poetry." T. E. Hulme thought that "All theories are toys." Mencken claimed that criticism "is no more than prejudice made plausible." Van Wyck Brooks's fictional spokesman Oliver Allston declared that critics should "abhor theories." And F. R. Leavis, unquestionably one of England's most influential critics, claimed that the experience of literature invites us "not to 'think about' and judge, but to 'feel

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into' or 'become'—to realize a complex experience that is given in words"; and the process for realizing that experience, in Leavis's view, did not involve "a theoretical system or a system determined by abstract considerations." Thus there is in the Anglo-American critical tradition a deep aversion to abstract thought about literature, most recently proclaimed in Iain McGilchrist's *Against Criticism* (1982), which argued that "The only genuine critical theory is that of non-theory, the only applicable abstraction the rejection of abstraction."

There are of course many virtues in approaching a work of literature in a state of openness to its particularities, and Professor Wellek admires those critics who have elucidated the richness of literary texts by such means. Yet in some cases this aversion to abstraction seems nothing more than a resistence to "frenchified" cerebration or to the felt ponderousness of the classifying Teutonic mind. In other cases enmity to theory is clearly an aversion to superimposing upon the literary work an a priori critical position, which thereby falsifies it. Wellek makes plain, however, that having a theory of literature need not lead to corruptions of the text and that the application of principles, standards, and values need not falsify the work at hand. In any case, it is the critic's job to invoke principles and standards.

For Professor Wellek, our critics' general aversion to theory makes it very difficult for a historian to make coherent sense of their total *oeuvre*. As his account makes plain, many of our critics have divagated inconsistently from close critical readings into reader or author psychology, or from sociology and Marxist assumptions into psychoanalysis and myth criticism without apparently being aware that glaring contradictions are sometimes produced by conflating these approaches. There is no space here to give an extensive account of how these problems have tended to vitiate our criticism, but the career of Kenneth Burke, one of the most difficult and influential critics of the period, may be chosen as exemplary. Is Burke "the foremost critic of our age and perhaps the greatest critic since Coleridge," as Stanley Edgar Hyman claimed in *The Armed Vision,* or is he a "Yankee crank," a "crackpot with a panacea," and "a circus-rider, indulging in intellectual capering and larking"—assessments recorded in William Rueckert's *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*? As Wellek takes us through Burke's published work—*Counter-Statement* (1931), *Permanence and Change* (1935), *Attitudes Toward History* (1937), *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), and *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966)—it becomes clear that Burke's highly acclaimed intellectual system, a secular summa supposed to embrace all the forms and uses of language, fails to achieve any clarity of purpose, insofar as literary criticism is concerned. *Permanence and Change,* for example, is written from Marxist assumptions about the contingent historical forces affecting literature; it glorifies Communism as "the only coherent and organized movement for the subjection of the technological genius to humane ends." Burke urges on us a realization of the "highly humanistic or poetic nature of [Communism's] fundamental criteria." (These remarks, written in 1935, prompt Wellek rightly to remark that "One can hardly imagine anything more divorced from historical reality, even at that time.")

In his next phase, Burke follows I. A. Richards into psychology, finding poetry to be "homeopathic magic" and declaring its genres to be psychic formulas for the acceptance or rejection of life. A divergence into rhetoric follows, accompanied by an increasing preoccupation with semantics, puns, and bizarre phonetic associations in which the symbol in poetry becomes, for Burke, a cryptographer's code to be deciphered. Meanwhile, Burke comes to deny art as the product of historical causations; and Freudianism, which continues to be a mainstay of his whole approach, is overtly denied. The experience of reading Burke's books has always been for me, I must confess, a difficult one. Ideas crowd each other with abandon; Burke's mind skips about

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from topic to topic, book to book. The relation between his topics and ideas is never a clear one. For many years I suspected that Burke had what mental health practitioners call a thought disorder. Wellek has convinced me that there is a method in Burke's incoherence, one dictated by his policy of "perspective by incongruity." This policy involves wrenching perceptions and ideas out of familiar contexts and juxtaposing them arbitrarily in order to see what happens. I must confess that nothing much happens for me when I am exposed to Burke's associations, fusion of symbols logically at odds with each other, and "associational constellations." This process, which works in the poetic imagination, does not, in criticism, add up for me. Apparently it does not work for Wellek either, for he concludes his comprehensive discussion by remarking that Burke has no aesthetic sense and that literary texts have become simply pretexts for his speculative abandon: "In his theory, literature becomes absorbed into a scheme of linguistic action or rhetoric so all-embracing and all-absorbing that poetry as an art is lost sight of and the work of art is spun into a network of allusions, puns, and clusters of images without any regard for its wholeness or unity. Art perishes and one wonders what the grand drama is for . . . . In Burke extremes meet easily. All distinctions fall. The laws of evidence have ceased to function. He moves in a self-created verbal universe where everything may mean everything else."

One of the pleasures of reading a history of criticism like this is one's encounter with striking critical formulations, particularly those of a peevish or outraged character. George Moore thought the kiss in *The Portrait of a Lady* to be "one of the worst in literature, proclaiming the fact that Henry James knows very little about kissing, and that it does not interest him." Walter Raleigh thought Browning "an educated, interesting progressive pig" and claimed that Arnold must have been a Jew: "I know it, by his face, and his writing." Virginia Woolf called Joyce's *Ulysses* "a memorable catastrophe" and judged it "of inferior water," while E. M. Forster thought that Woolf's fiction "gave us, as it were, not the train itself but the draught a train makes as it flies by." Ezra Pound thought Gavin Douglas's translation of the *Aeneid* "better than the original" and called Pindar "the prize windbag of all ages." D. H. Lawrence, whose irrationalism is condemned by Wellek, thought Chekhov "a second-rate writer and a willy wet-leg." Yvor Winters called John Donne "over-sexed, neurotically so," complained about Wordsworth's similes ("The evening is not like a nun"), called Whitman "utterly lacking in literary talent," and summed up Pound as "merely a barbarian on the loose in a museum." Such views led Cleanth Brooks to call Winters a "moral cop, in his most vindictive mood."

However flamboyant or outrageous in expression, such critical attitudes are sometimes based on sharp analysis of literary texts. But often they are not, and Wellek is not unwilling to point out critics' internal contradictions and their ignorance of fundamental issues in criticism. He does not shirk the historian's job of evaluating their productions. Van Wyck Brooks's *Makers and Finders,* the five-volume literary history of America, is judged "a dismal failure. There is scarcely any analysis of actual books, nothing about a continuity of literary themes or forms. Nor is there anything coherent and critical about the world-view of the writers and their relationship to the past or to Europe." William Crary Brownell, now largely forgotten, is on the other hand revived and praised for upholding "in theory and practice the ideal of a judicial criticism using rational arguments and standards, a rare creed in his and any time." And Virginia Woolf is faulted for saying at one point that "the sentence made by men" is "too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use," only to contradict herself by saying that "a writer has no sex," that "the greatest writers lay no stress upon sex one way or the other," and that "a great mind must be androgynous." Critics like Mencken—and more re-

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cently Geoffrey Hartman—who substitute their own "creativity" for the analysis, explication, and judgment of texts are faulted by Wellek for "advocating a complete liberty of interpretation in an attempt to exalt criticism to the status of art, to obliterate the distinction between criticism and creation for which Roland Barthes invented the convenient common term 'écriture.'"

If Wellek does not hold out for a single correct interpretation, then, he still exposes incorrect judgments wherever he finds them. He remarks: "My own convictions, I hope, are never imposed or obtruded as a fixed, preconceived pattern." And, on the whole, they are not: he is more than fair, I believe, in characterizing the doctrines of his critics and, where he has had disagreements with them, explaining the ground for the debate.

What kind of literary criticism does he admire, and what are its characteristics? His convictions presuppose the objective existence of the literary work: there must be an object of study, something to analyze. The author's psychology, or subconscious, cannot be this object of study, for we have no adequate access to it. Nor can the reader's psychology, the so-called reception-aesthetic, be a substitute for the work itself. Nor can the material conditions of society, historical forces, shifting moral formulations, and other extrinsic applications wholly account for the work either. In Wellek's view, the work of art is a dynamic object that fuses a system of norms involving sound, meaning, objects of representation, metaphysical qualities, structures of determination and indeterminacy, factors of historical contingency, and so on. Without this sense of the work of art as an actual object of knowledge, no sound criticism is possible for Wellek. (These presuppositions are most accessibly elaborated in "The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art" in Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature.*)

Given his perspective, Wellek finds the New Critics to have given us the best literary criticism in the first half of the twentieth century. While declining to be lumped with them as a member of a Yale formalist school, Wellek distinguishes among their views in order to show how much they actually differ from each other. Yet at the same time, he points out their common assumptions and defends them from the charge of "esoteric aestheticism," sterile formalism, anti-historicism, spurious scientism, and pedagogic utilitarianism. His analysis of their doctrines has convinced me that they have been wrongly arraigned and that, among all modern critics, they have had the most illuminating things to say about the literary work as an object of art:

> I will not conceal my own conviction that the New Criticism has stated or reaffirmed many basic truths to which future ages will have to return: the specific nature of the aesthetic transaction, the normative presence of a work of art which forms a structure, a unity, coherence, a whole, which cannot be simply battered about and is comparatively independent of its origins and effects. The New Critics have also persuasively described the function of literature in not yielding abstract knowledge or information, message or stated ideology, and they have devised a technique of interpretation which often succeeded in illuminating not so much the form of a poem as the implied attitudes of the author, the resolved or unresolved tensions and contradictions: a technique that yields a standard of judgment that cannot be easily dismissed in favor of the currently popular, sentimental, and simple. The charge of elitism cannot get around the New Critics' assertion of quality and value. A decision between good and bad art remains the unavoidable duty of criticism. The humanities would abdicate their function in society if they surrendered to a neutral scientism and indifferent relativism or if they succumbed to the imposition of alien norms required by political indoctrination. Particularly on these two fronts the New Critics have waged a valiant fight which, I am afraid, must be fought over again in the future.

No doubt these judgments will seem old-fashioned in the current atmosphere of "creative" criticism, *Rezeptionsaesthetik,* and trendy deconstructionist critical nihilism in which

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the work of literary art disappears simply into écriture, in which the "prison house" of language is said to be a "self-enclosed system in no relation to reality," in which "there is nothing but text." J. Hillis Miller has suggested as much, and it was Paul de Man's view that poetry only "names the void, asserts itself as pure nothingness." But for Wellek, if criticism is aesthetic invention, if the art work dissolves into psychology, if the poem is indistinguishable from the comic book, "if every text is ambiguous, polysemic, 'undecidable,' we arrive at the end of scholarship . . . ." Luckily for us, as Wellek points out, most literary critics in the present situation have rejected such unearned skepticism and egocentrism and—through their editions and annotations, source studies, biographies, bibliographies, and studies in the social and historical conditions in which art is produced—have reaffirmed the great task of literary criticism: to elucidate, analyze, and evaluate literary works and thereby to preserve the past and transmit to the future "the heritage of great literature in an age of technological civilization." No one, of course, will be able to agree with all of Wellek's judgments of the modern critics. But I for one cannot disagree with his defense of the New Criticism or with his assessment of the current critical scene. And his call for a return to "a proper respect for facts, for evidence, for established values and traditions and simply for common sense and rational approaches to the study of literature" is most timely indeed.

Hopper's scene

Gail Levin Hopper's Places.
Knopf, 89 pages, $10.95

reviewed by James R. Mellow

Edward Hopper was an artist who did not want his paintings tagged with ulterior meanings. He tended to view the critical profession with suspicion and doubt. When critics commented on the stark "loneliness" of his subjects—gas stations on deserted country roads, bleak Victorian houses on the opposite side of railroad tracks, men and women isolated in characterless hotel rooms—Hopper objected. As Gail Levin notes in her highly informative monograph, *Hopper's Places*, the taciturn Hopper responded by saying "the loneliness thing is overdone." He was, however, often ambivalent and sometimes furtive about expressing his opinions. On another occasion, answering the same charge, he commented: "It's probably a reflection of my own, if I may say, loneliness. I don't know. It could be the whole human condition."

When partisans tried to enroll Hopper in the ranks of the American Scene painters of the 1930s, he rejected the notion, claiming that painters like Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry "caricatured America." He plainly wanted none of it. "I always wanted to do myself," he said. "The French painters didn't talk about the 'French Scene' or the English painters about the 'English Scene.'"

Hopper was, of course, one of the innumerable painters engaged in the nagging and seemingly obligatory search for a truly native America, just as American writers were expected to pursue the phantom of The Great American Novel. The Hudson River School painters, for example, at the start of the Industrial Revolution, were intent on capturing the idyllic and rustic aspects of a vanishing American landscape; painters like Church and Bierstadt wanted to acquaint the art public with the grandeurs of the wilderness and the Rockies. There was a large element of the romantic and nostalgic in their undertakings. Among Hopper's nineteenth-century predecessors, it is Thomas Eakins, with his clinically unsentimental approach, who serves as a real comparison with Hopper. Hopper's regionalist contemporaries—Benton, Curry, Grant Wood—went in for folksiness and down-home ruralism: baptisms in Kansas or the myth of Persephone transposed to the Missouri wheatlands. Modernists like Marsden Hartley or Charles Demuth brought a calcu-

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lated primitivism to Maine landscapes or a fastidious Cubistic approach to American church steeples.

Like Hartley, Hopper had studied and painted in Paris and Europe early in his career. He later claimed that when he returned from his last trip abroad in 1910 he felt a sense of shock, finding the American scene crude and raw: "It took me ten years to get over Europe." But having found his real vocation here, Hopper made the assertion without the fashionable chauvinism of the regionalist painters. He created his own version of the American Scene, one that was something more than a topical cliché.

It was never, however, a definition of the American character as distinct from the American Scene. Hopper is seldom very convincing in his treatment of the human figure. He lacks the obsessive attention to anatomical detail and dress that one finds, say, in Eakins's figure paintings. One never mistakes Hopper's always bosomy women, or his anonymous men in shirtsleeves or nondescript business suits, for personalized portraits of real people. In this respect, Hopper is hardly the father of the warts-and-all school of photographic realism now in vogue in American painting. (Significantly, Hopper once complained that photographic images "do not have enough weight.") It is in the interaction of the figure with its setting, its milieu, that one immediately recognizes the accuracy of Hopper's grasp of certain phases of the American experience—the dull chronicles of wasted time, the doldrums of small-town life. In a Hopper painting, the figure, when it succeeds, vitalizes the particular mood or atmosphere.

Hopper knew all about the isolated life, even in a big city; he led one of the most cloistered and circumspect lives of any of the modern American masters. He was noticeably cautious about money, avoided the entanglements of the art world, and for most of his adult years lived in a cramped apartment in Greenwich Village. He remained faithful to those two essential people in the life of an artist who wants to survive into posterity—a determined wife, jealous *for* his success beyond that of any other artist, and a dealer, equally committed. His wife, Josephine Nivison, a painter herself, kept a tight rein on her husband; for forty-three years, she posed for just about all the buxom women in his paintings. And Hopper, until his death in 1967, remained loyal to his original dealer, Frank Rehn.

There is, not surprisingly, a trace of the voyeur in Hopper's work that adds to its uniqueness. He made an art out of the invasion of privacy, the thrill of the outsider's brief glimpses into lighted interiors at night: a woman undressing in her apartment; a businessman and his secretary, after hours, in a glare-lit office; people engaged in apparently innocent activities that nevertheless carry an air of the sexually provocative. There is always something more going on in a Hopper painting than meets the casual eye. A woman in a parlor car turns to give another woman, across the aisle, an unaccountable stare: the mystery of the unexplained.

Gail Levin has written perceptively about these aspects of Hopper's work in an earlier volume, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist* (1980). In *Hopper's Places,* she narrows the focus to Hopper's portraits of streets and houses, which tend to be more particularized in every detail than his paintings of people. Hopper seemed to delight in the tawdriness and seediness of his mundane settings. Writing about his contemporary Charles Burchfield, Hopper, with an expansiveness rare in his pronouncements, described a subject matter that was in reality closer to his own vision than to Burchfield's: "Our native architecture with its hideous beauty, its fantastic roofs, pseudo-Gothic, French Mansard, Colonial, mongrel or what not, with eye-searing colors or delicate harmonies of faded paint, shouldering one another along interminable streets that taper off into swamps or dump heaps—these appear again and again, as they should in any honest delineation of the American scene."

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In this realm, Hopper *is* closer to the present-day photo realists. To discover how close is the central purpose of Levin's monograph, for she has searched out and painstakingly photographed the sites of Hopper's favored locales—Gloucester, Massachusetts, where, in 1924, he honeymooned with Josephine; the coastal villages of Maine, where they later summered; and Cape Cod, where, in 1934, the Hoppers finally built a permanent summer studio for themselves. Levin observes that people often make the mistake of thinking they have discovered Hopper motifs everywhere in these regions because the run-down streets and houses seem so familiar—due, in large part, to the authenticity of Hopper's paintings. Hopper made coastal New England, with its frame houses, his own. She notes that Hopper tended to paint "backwater locations" that were not so afflicted by the American disease of progress. That, too, tells us something about the character of Hopper's choices. Decades later, even with renovations and inevitable changes, the buildings and the settings are still recognizable in their down-to-earth seediness. Levin's book, however, is more than an exercise in historicism and landmark preservation. It illuminates Hopper's method, making it clear that, for strictly compositional reasons or in order to underscore the mood of emptiness or isolation, Hopper, on occasion, willingly altered the details of the actual scene. But the surprise—shown by Levin's juxtapositions of her photographs of the extant sites with the paintings in question—is how frequently Hopper could achieve his aims *without* changing the details. In that respect Levin's monograph does double duty; for it reminds us that what we often attribute to the artist's style is some element drawn from the scene itself.

But there was more than an obsession with realism at the base of Hopper's ambitions. Like the great masters, he wanted to force the "unwilling medium of paint" into a record of his emotions: "I find any digression from this large aim leads me to boredom." But, of course, boredom was Hopper's subject as well, the boredom of hotel lobbies, the boredom of blank streets and all-night diners, the boredom of an usherette in a movie house, waiting for the second feature to end.

It was Hopper's need to get the "whole human condition" into his paintings that separates his peopled (or deserted) landscapes and cityscapes from those of the American Scenists with whom he was bracketed. Now we are beginning to distinguish his ominous and encroaching woods from their artificial trees. Hopper was a more intellectual painter than we gave him credit for during the long unfolding of his critical reputation. In Paris, he had developed a taste for the Symbolist poets, particularly Verlaine and Rimbaud, whom he was fond of quoting. Later he became interested in Proust, Freud, and Mann, as well as Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Frost. Since his death, scholars like Levin, who is now working on a critical biography of Hopper, have been exploring the played-down personal life of the artist. And at last we are getting a sense of the character and personality of the man, the quirks of mind and curiosity that led him to bring to the ordinary and banal aspects of American life in his time a unique and mordant poetry.

Americans in Mexico

Carlos Fuentes The Old Gringo.
Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
180 pages, $14.95

reviewed by Mark Falcoff

The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes is perhaps one of the best-known Latin American writers in the United States, nowadays not so much for his novels as for his strident polemics against U.S. policy in Central America, and his relentless liberal-baiting. People who do not know the man personally are often surprised to learn that he is not only extremely amiable in person but speaks

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perfect, American-accented English. He grew up here (in fact, in Washington, where his father was a diplomat) and continues to spend at least half his time in this country, which he likes very much. Indeed, his anti-Americanism is something of a pose, obligatory for any Latin American writer who wishes to remain well regarded by the more "advanced" and "progressive" elements in his own country. Perhaps more important, it permits him to validate his credentials as a "real" Latin American writer with the American cultural community.

Fuentes has made very serious contributions to Mexican and Latin American literature, though truth to tell it is not upon these that his current reputation rests. Two of his three earliest novels, *La región más transparente* (1958) and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962) broke a long silence on the real history of twentieth-century Mexico, and unmasked the new class of corrupt "revolutionary" generals who created a society in some respects as cruel, inegalitarian, and unjust as the one they had overthrown a generation or two before. Writing from the left, Fuentes was boldly treading upon very sensitive ground, for during the 1930s and 1940s most of the Mexican literary establishment lived on government subsidies, in return for which they were expected to continually refurbish the myths of the state and the system.

Fuentes is thus one of the seminal figures in what is frequently called the "boom" in Latin American literature, though he has since been overtaken in popularity by other writers, notably the Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez. There are, of course, many fine writers who continue to be unknown abroad, but the group to which Fuentes belongs shares one characteristic which is of particular relevance here: his public is now basically the one which reads him in translation. By this no particular offense is meant. Latin Americans are simply not great readers of books; theirs is a culture of newsprint, café gossip, and conspiracy theories. This is true not merely of very poor countries like Bolivia, or culturally repressed ones like Paraguay, but even sophisticated urban societies like Argentina or Colombia, where a novel usually receives a first press run of three thousand copies, and where a sale of fifty thousand copies constitutes a blockbuster.

What this means is that a writer can be regarded as passé in his own country and in its wider language area and still be regarded as hot property in Western Europe and the United States, with no particular damage to his literary gifts, his bank account, or his self-esteem. Or not even passé. Manuel Puig (*El beso de la mujer araña* and other works) was being published and sold in French before the Argentine public was ready to buy his works in a local edition. If one thinks of a writer in terms of his public, Puig could be regarded as basically a North Atlantic literary phenomenon. The same is true of the Chilean leftist literary critic Ariel Dorfman, for whom the 1973 coup was a first-class ticket to the lush pastures of American liberal guilt, where he has been comfortably grazing ever since.

These reflections are prompted by Carlos Fuentes's newest novel, *The Old Gringo*. Whatever its literary merits or lack of them, it is a book for Americans, not for Mexicans. To be sure, the setting and the subject are Mexican; the idea of the book—namely, the incompatibility of Mexican and American cultures—is also Mexican; nonetheless, the *approach* of the author is decidedly un-Mexican. The major characters are American; they pose the issues in a most American way; the reader "sees" the story unfold through *their* inner drama. With the exception of General Tomás Arroyo, the Mexicans in the book act as a sort of a stage army to provide local color. If this sounds like a Hollywood film, perhaps it should be noted here that Jane Fonda has already taken an option on the novel, and by next summer we may hear Fuentes's speeches on the evils of American civilization resounding over the loudspeakers in drive-in theaters all over Arkansas and Louisiana.

The old gringo is Ambrose Bierce, an

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elderly American writer, soldier, and adventurer who disappeared into the maelstrom of revolutionary Mexico in 1914 and was never heard from again. Upon this single fact Fuentes builds his tale, set in revolutionary Chihuahua, at the time overrun by General Pancho Villa's rebel armies. As a counterweight to Bierce, who has gone to Mexico "to die"—as we are repeatedly told—Fuentes introduces the character of Harriet Winslow, a schoolteacher from Washington, D.C., who has been contracted by the wealthy Miranda family, owner of one of the largest haciendas in the state, to tutor their children in English. By the time Miss Winslow has arrived, the Mirandas have fled; what possessions they have left behind have been confiscated by the revolutionary armies or by the tenants they so recently exploited; and their grand house is the headquarters of a detachment of revolutionary troops led by General Arroyo, until recently a day-laborer on the estate, and now the self-appointed avenging angel of four centuries of injustice.

Fuentes does a good job of reconstructing the texture of the period and the place, building as he does upon a rich literary tradition of revolutionary narrative. Villa's armies were attacking a system which was indeed evil and deserved to be swept away, but they did so in a fashion which lacked a clear social goal and showed very little concern for human life. During 1914 and 1915 many Mexicans who by no stretch of the imagination could be regarded as pillars of the old regime were nonetheless liquidated (or in the language of the time, *quebrado,* literally "broken"). When José Vasconcelos, himself a revolutionary, implored Villa's men to spare the life of one innocent lawyer, they replied, "What kind of reactionary thoughts are these, licenciado? Aren't we in the midst of a *revolution*?" Fuentes catches some of the pointlessness of this violence, which led to a social order that was far less revolutionary than it claimed, although in *The Old Gringo* he is mainly concerned to hold up to ridicule the liberal squeamishness of Miss Winslow, who refuses to see that you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs.

The portrait of Harriet Winslow is not, however, wholly categorical. Fuentes leaves us with the impression that he is even a bit touched by her naïve notions of social change. "What she had on her mind," he writes, "was to establish a basic schedule for the elementary instruction of the children, the salvage chores of the women, and the rebuilding chores of the men. Today—not *mañana*—the children would start learning the basic skills, the three Rs of English-language instruction: reading, writing, and 'rithmetic." When the Mirandas return, she explains to General Arroyo, "the hacienda would have an organization that spoke for the people who lived and worked there, and would protect their rights."

This is certainly one side of the American character. The other is represented by Bierce, who has a far less optimistic view of the possibilities of inter-American relations and who clearly speaks for Fuentes himself. He continually reminds Harriet Winslow of the skeletons which lurk in the closet of American history; of the purported need of the United States "to be strong with the weak"; of the sinister hidden agendas behind its high-minded international crusades. At the time Woodrow Wilson was busy trying to teach the Mexicans a lesson by landing troops at Veracruz, to which Bierce, by implication at least, strongly objects. As he explains to Harriet, "Mexico is not a bad country. It's just a different country . . . . I want to learn to live with Mexico, I don't want to save it."

Not surprisingly, the implications of this are thoroughly reactionary. If "progress" is a sham, then what can "revolution" mean? This is the oldest unresolved problem in Mexican political thought, a theme which—if Fuentes had meant this novel for his countrymen—could easily have served as its centerpiece. Instead, he has it both ways: the Americans are bloodthirsty imperialists and also naïve do-gooders who stick their noses into places where they are not wanted. When they are sending Pershing's troops into

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Northern Mexico, it is because they are trying to protect William Randolph Hearst's investments in land, cattle, and mines; but when they attempt to apply their own standards to his country—due process, the rule of law, etc.—they are undermining its nationality.

Once the three basic characters are introduced, and their situation described, the novel settles down to a three-pointed debate on these issues, and on the fate of the old gringo. In an effort to save his life, Harriet goes to bed with General Arroyo, and likes it—naturally. (An earlier reference to an abandoned fiancé in Washington suggests a *romance blanche*.) These bedroom scenes are not only gratuitously pornographic, but antihistorical: it is simply not possible to imagine a prim Gibson girl, a sort of precursor of suffragettes, reveling in the most advanced techniques of coitus in 1914, and in Mexico of all places. Nor does it seem fair to load the entire weight of Mexican history onto one act of sexual congress ("One quick ejaculation [of General Arroyo] washed away the defeats of Chapultepec and Buenavista." Oh really?) What *is* possible to imagine is an American college girl in 1986 on her vacation working "with the people" (in Mexico, perhaps, but more likely, Nicaragua) reading this book and fully identifying with its heroine. At least to the point of proving that she isn't like the *other* Americans who have despoiled a country of its basic riches, etc., by offering some residuals to the exploited natives.

Indeed, in a multitude of ways *The Old Gringo* is a kind of *roman à clef* in reverse: all kinds of things which happen nowadays are set back by seventy years. For example, executions are postponed until morning so that the newsreel crew (in this case, from Hollywood instead of CBS or public television) can get footage. And Pancho Villa is quoted as saying that the U.S. troops at Veracruz are strengthening, not weakening, the tyrant Huerta—which sounds a bit like current discussions about U.S. support for the contras in Nicaragua, with the inconvenient detail that at the time Villa was the only revolutionary leader in Mexico who did support Woodrow Wilson, which explains why he had a ready access to guns, ammunition, and uniforms out of El Paso and Brownsville.

The dust jacket of this book suggests that it is "about" the basic incompatibility of the United States and Mexico. Fuentes has Bierce resume its argument thus: "what mattered was to live with Mexico in spite of progress and democracy, that each of us carries his Mexico and his United States within him, a dark and bloody frontier we dare to cross only at night." The proximity of the two societies cannot be avoided, to be sure, but to each it means very different things. For Mexicans the United States is a permanent temptation or challenge—to its many poor, it is a symbol of abundance and freedom; to its well-to-do, a sharp reproach. Americans have no such clear-cut notions about their neighbor, so what Fuentes does is to take advantage of their ignorance by presenting a kind of seamless Mexico where no matter what Americans do they are wrong. Thus *The Old Gringo* addresses the concerns of liberal Americans of the present day, while ignoring or distorting the real issues of Mexican history. No doubt other critics will properly want to address the novel in purely literary terms, ignoring the political and historical perspective from which it is written; but it is probably this aspect that will account for the book's commercial success and give it its greatest resonance.

Novels with politics

Robert Boyers Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel Since 1945. Oxford University Press, 259 pages, $29.95

reviewed by David Pryce-Jones

Marxist views about the writer and society penetrate democratic countries to an astonishing extent. Entire debates about "commitment" or "the function of the writer" are

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accommodations to concepts prevailing in the Soviet Union. There, the writer exists to convey Party ends as effectively as possible to the masses who must work to realize them. Every single novel published in the Soviet Union is a political novel; every character within those novels has a didactic role. Anti-Party literature cannot exist officially. Naturally, the rewards for the compliant writer are high.

Quite why so many European writers have been glamorized by the prospect that they too might do Party duty is a separate question, to be answered by psychologists rather than historians. The Bernard Shaws and Romain Rollands, the Brechts and Malrauxs, were the first of many to politicize literature according to the doctrines of the Soviet Union. The influence of the Soviet Union, steadily extending since 1945, directly through its satellites and indirectly through its admirers, has put under great pressure the residual belief that the proper concern of literature is the human condition as a whole.

In the current intellectual climate in the West, a writer is still a purveyor of ideas and words, but by virtue of his profession he also becomes a representative figure, and if at all successful, entitled to the rank of spokesman. As such, he may sign manifestos and resolutions upon all the issues of the day without anyone calling into question his authority to do so. His books are examined for their "message." In these proceedings, the degradation of his standing as an individual is more subtle but no less sure than it would be through membership of the Soviet Writers' Union.

The primacy of the political dimension of literature opens a great many novels and virtually all poetry to the charge of escapism and triviality. Correspondingly, whether a particular work promotes or rejects a political system, and totalitarianism above all, turns into a touchstone, here as in the Soviet Union. No novels in the postwar period have had the resonance to compare with those offering imaginative insights into totalitarianism, from Orwell and Solzhenitsyn, to Camus's *La Peste* and Golding's *Lord of the Flies.*

To entertain a discussion of the political novel outside these developments is deformingly abstract, and rather provoking as well. The title of Robert Boyers's new book, *Atrocity and Amnesia,* with its suggestion of big events and inadequate responses, is simple misrepresentation, down to its opportunistic alliteration. Of course nobody gave Boyers a brief to write one book rather than another and at the outset he disclaims any intention to survey contemporary political fiction. After two preliminary chapters of theorizing, he produces specialized textual commentaries on a single selected work by writers whom it is convenient to list at this point—V. S. Naipaul, Graham Greene, García Márquez, Solzhenitsyn, Nadine Gordimer, Jorge Semprun, George Steiner, Günter Grass, and Milan Kundera. Dissociation between the wide subject matter and the narrow academic treatment could hardly be more complete.

For Boyers, the political novel happens not to be one whose subject is politics or ideology in practice, as in Paul Bowles's *The Spider's House,* say, or Sartre's *Les Chemins de la liberté.* Nor is it a novel in which individual freedom is constrained by politics, as in Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* or Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago.* Still less is its concern to be politically instructive, as with Michel Tournier, Richard Hughes, Elie Wiesel, Olivia Manning's Balkan trilogy.

Instead, he devotes himself to theoretical definitions all of which prove to be self-limiting for no very discernible reason. In a first attempt, he tentatively defines a political novel as one with "a projection of hope, a movement towards a world not yet made." This supposes that hope and the world not yet made are compatible, if not synonymous, a dubious proposition in the light of contemporary events. The formulation would also serve for the merest romance, which is perhaps why Boyers is soon trying to improve it into, "if the work is in fact properly designated a political novel, the determinate goal toward which the various elements tend

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will have something to do with ideas about community, collective action, and the distribution of power." The secretary of any local Party literary section will go along with that. "Something to do" with collective action and the distribution of power is a phrase which weasels around the crucial test of whether more of these ends is desirable, or less.

Boyers's own disposition may be discerned when he praises Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* for having in it "the idea of politics as the collective assertion of the will to power." Discussing Grass's *The Tin Drum,* he remarks similarly with approval that "political novels are always necessarily concerned with change or the prospect of change."

Practically every novel carries a notion of change, with only a Butor or a Robbe-Grillet so static or mannered as to be disqualified by this criterion. In a yet further definition, the stress on the passage of time is slightly altered when Boyers judges that "a political novel is necessarily engaged in drawing comparisons and thinking out ideas whose motive is change or resistance to change."

A certain conclusion is then adumbrated. "The consideration of ethics in the political novel is also necessarily a consideration of its capacity to project a sense of what an acceptable political culture might be." Inevitably he has at once to add the qualification, amounting to a denial of the whole proposition, that most political fictions do not get around to showing that culture but leave readers to infer it.

Nothing very helpful can be made of all these scattered and vague aspirations about community and collective will and projected hope. Followed through, the definitions together add up to thoroughly vapid piety about improvement through activism, without specifying what activism might really be like.

Repeated use of the word "necessarily" usually reveals a man who has read more Marxist books than is good for him. Marxist critics have confected an idea of "absent cause," and this has impressed Boyers. Reduced from jargon, it means that there are conditions within any novel which a novelist may take for granted without the bother of elucidating. In a typical domestic novel, for example, it is understood that larger social and political realities continue to pertain, at whatever distance from the localized setting. Jane Austen's novels were written during the Napoleonic campaigns, an overall political factor for which there is no internal evidence in her books.

Now presumably "absent cause" was introduced by Boyers not out of chic but in order to be an organizing principle in the essays about political novelists whom he wishes to discuss. Not a bit of it. A red herring, in every sense. If the reader wishes to interpret Boyers's writers in the light of "absent cause," then he will have to do so for himself.

No critical principle or unifying perception holds together the works under discussion. Without exception, however, the writers happen to be under the spotlight of present fame and fashion. In the order already given, they generalize into a Third Worlder, a Western renegade, a Latin American, a dissident Russian, a guilty South African, a gentile victim of Nazism and a Jewish witness, a repentant German, an émigré Czech. This makes for a clean sweep of headline issues, except for America, but then American writers enjoy the privilege of living too far from the totalitarian experience to be able to qualify for inclusion according to Boyers's standards of publicized activism.

It is not clear whether totalitarianism is actually supposed to be the "absent cause" which these writers have in common, but if so, it disintegrates: some of them are against it, others are for it. Márquez does permanent Party duty, in whatever imaginative form it might be cast in his fiction. The latter part of Semprun's career has been devoted to undoing earlier Party duty. Readers of Gordimer will find themselves advised about right conduct against apartheid. For years Greene and Grass have been

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among the most assiduous makers of political statements, the former often an outright Soviet apologist, the latter now seemingly following down that path. But anti-Party sentiment inspires everything Solzhenitsyn writes.

Perhaps it is too late to complain of a style with coinages such as "enwombed, nexal, motivic, prioritize, narrativization," or about a form of essay which cranks toward the concluding handclaps of "major work," "satisfyingly complete," "authentically visionary," and the rest of it. All the same, to submit writers so diverse to this grind of response and language is to kill excitement and to enforce conformity. In the world as it is, every one of them had a specific context and purpose. To treat political novels as academic documents is to carry the aesthetic point of view to an extreme: in contrast, it is vulgar Marxism to make a common political cause out of assorted writers.

In all likelihood, Naipaul had no direct political aim in *Guerrillas* beyond the telling of truth as he sees it. Boyers reaches the lamely activist conclusion. "No one can say for certain what effects Naipaul's work will continue to have, whether his unmasking of third world delusions will serve illiberal or counterrevolutionary purposes." How could the purposes to which readings of Naipaul might or might not be put have any bearing on evaluations of his work?

It is also remarkable to present *The First Circle* as though it were problematic, written in terms of the characters' "self-confrontation." If it is a great political novel, and Boyers does not think otherwise, "it must be seen to operate politically in a way that does not compromise the other functions assigned to it by the literary imagination." "It has a politics," we are told, "not a political ideology, but a political vision of that which human beings require, minimally, to live decently with one another." That "minimally" is fun.

"Greene's careful probing of the necessary limits in this novel, like his respect for the necessarily limited parameters and registers of a work so schematically conceived as *The Quiet American,* makes his book a minor classic in the genre of the modern political novel." In itself, the sentence is close to parody, but the judgment is comically remote from Greene's overwhelming desire to hurt America and American interests, as most consummately expressed in *The Quiet American.* No secret has been made of Greene's waging of the Cold War in that spirit. Preferring parameters and registers to plain reality, Boyers is in the line of those innocent American preachers whom Greene loves to depict as more harmful than any old original sinners.

Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* has no business here, if Boyers's definitions are justified. There is nothing about projected hope, or change and time, or about the distribution of power; and even to allow for collective action is stretching a point. A novel of ideas, it deals with the argument which the state of Israel has opened up about the nature of being Jewish, nationalistically, religiously, or otherwise, and the part which Nazism might have played in reaching conclusions. While failing to catch his own hare, Boyers nonetheless examines skillfully the criticism of those who objected that the last word in the novel was given to Hitler, and in the idiom of the survivors of Nazism. The author and his characters, Boyers maintains, are distinct.

The restoration of primacy to readings might be very welcome as a stand against ever-encroaching politicization in literature. It is eccentric, if not meaningless, to start the process at the point where literature is deliberately political. This enterprise is as confused as it is confusing.

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Notebook

The avant-garde comes to Hofstra

by Roger Kimball

This past November, Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, sponsored a three-day "international" conference entitled "Avant-Garde Art and Literature: Toward a Reappraisal of Modernism." As originally conceived, the conference was meant to celebrate Hofstra's collection of avant-garde art and literature, which was donated to the university by Howard L. and Muriel Weingrow in 1972 but only recently catalogued. The Weingrow Collection, a potpourri of some four thousand books, manuscripts, prints, manifestos, and ephemera by artists associated with Surrealism, Dada, Art Nouveau, Cubism, and kindred movements, was hailed by the conference organizers and press releases as the largest collection of such materials outside the Museum of Modern Art. A small sampling of the collection was on view in a gallery at Hofstra's library during the conference.

But if the Weingrow Collection provided the original impetus for the conference, in the end it assumed a life of its own, quite overshadowing the artifacts it was meant to celebrate. It was difficult to get a clear idea of how many people participated in the conference. One administrator connected with Hofstra estimated that altogether there were some six-hundred people registered, including the speakers. Audiences in the sessions I attended ranged from about thirty to hundred people. In any case, in its final form, the conference comprised a stunning agglomerate of papers, presentations, exhibitions, and sundry other events, including, to quote from the "Directors' Message" that prefaced the program for the conference, "poetry, plays, music, film, a book fair, gala events, dining, dancing and dazzle."

On the academic side, the conference featured dozens of forums and panels on the requisite avant-garde "isms," including Cubism, Expressionism, Futurism, Constructivism, and Surrealism, not to mention Modernism, Postmodernism, and Feminism. One could hear William Grange of the Department of Drama at Florida Southern College on "Father-Son Conflict in German Expressionist Drama," or Erica Doctorow of the Swirbul Library at Adelphi University on "Hannah Höch Photomontage: Images of Women in Weimar Society." In a panel entitled "Djuna Barnes and Modernism: The Self Inscribed," Louise A. DeSalvo of the Department of English at Hunter College spoke on "'To Make her Mutton at Sixteen': Rape, Incest and Child Abuse in *The Antiphon*." Then there were the obligatory sessions on "Women as Artists and Subjects of Art," on Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, "The Adventures of the Avant-Garde in Latin America and Spain," and more—much more: a panel on "Periodicals as Instruments of the Avant-Garde," for example, and a forum that mooted the question "Is There an Avant-Garde Theater Today?" (I had to miss that session, unfortunately, so I can't tell you the answer.) All together, there were some sixty papers and talks.

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One of my favorite sessions was the panel on "Theories of the Avant-Garde." John R. Boly, Yale trained, but now on the English faculty at Dartmouth College, presented an elegantly nihilistic deconstructionist meditation on the avant-garde's cult of novelty. Professor Boly's paper was deeply, hermetically, obscure, a jewel of the genre, and he himself, demurely dressed in a conservative sportscoat and tie, communicated an air of impervious, if somewhat weary, irony. By contrast, Andrew Ross, who teaches English at Princeton, delivered a fervently *engagé* paper on "Politically Updating the Avant-Garde." Predictably, Professor Ross's contribution was full of talk of "emancipatory mass culture" and loving allusions to Brecht, Benjamin, and "*alternative* discourses that would be immune to the rationality of everyday trade and exchange." Professor Ross spoke with a marked cockney accent, and, true to form, was dressed in a punk-inspired costume reminiscent of the East Village. The stylistic differences between the two men—between an academic aesthetic nihilist and a committed academic Marxist—provided a droll contrast.

The keynote speaker of the conference was Anna Balakian, Chairperson of the Department of Comparative Literature at New York University. Professor Balakian was introduced by her former student, Barbara Lekatsas, Co-Director of the Hofstra conference and Special Assistant to the Director of Hofstra's Cultural Center. Dr. Lekatsas, who also, it happens, holds a brown belt in karate, presented Professor Balakian to us as "one of the leading scholars of our century in the field of modernism." Presumably, this was meant as a rhetorical flourish. For Professor Balakian can by no stretch of the imagination be considered one of the century's leading scholars of anything. The truth is, she enjoys what we might generously describe as a modest reputation as a scholar of Surrealism. But as the conference proceeded, I began to suspect that, at least at Hofstra, such wild hyperbole was *de rigeur*. Professor Balakian began her talk, "The Problematics of Modernism," by confiding that she liked to play the devil's advocate. In fact, though, her paper offered nothing new or controversial. It merely rehearsed, with stupefying verbosity, the familiar clichés about the self-defeating nature of the avant-garde's demand for novelty, retailing along the way the usual stories about modernism's search for the absolute. "The Problematics of Modernism" opened the conference, and I knew then that it was going to be a long three days.

Probably the best-known participant in the conference was Rosalind E. Krauss, co-founder and co-editor of *October* magazine, a prolific and influential writer on modernist art and Professor of Art at Hunter College of the City University of New York. Professor Krauss (who was renamed "Kraus" in the Hofstra literature) delivered a paper on Surrealist photography entitled "Photography's Exquisite Corpse." Readers familiar with her work on Surrealism will not be surprised to learn that she discovered in the photography of Man Ray, Tristan Tzara, and others a sustained effort to explode our taken-for-granted assumptions about the way the world is structured, especially as regards gender and sexual identity.

In order to appreciate the force of Professor Krauss's position, however, one must realize that she likes to pretend that her work has revolutionary epistemological implications. She is particularly fond of acting as if one can somehow abrogate the laws of logic merely by asserting contradictions. This is no doubt one reason why she has been so smitten by the quasi-philosophical argot of post-structuralism, for which the strictures of traditional epistemology are anathema. In Professor Krauss's writing, we are often told that this or that work of art in effect contravenes the "repressive" laws of identity or non-contradiction. In the present lecture, Surrealism, having been credited with dissolving "the natural in which normalcy can be grounded," was said to be "at least potentially open" to "dissolving" the fundamental distinctions and categories through which we constitute reality, among which categories Professor Krauss numbers

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gender. For the Surrealist, she said, "no biologically determined idea of the normal" should operate.

What all this might mean is never really examined, of course; at bottom, like much of Surrealism's overheated rhetoric, it is the sheerest nonsense. And it certainly has precious little to do with the experience of Surrealist photography as *art*. But it does have the unquestioned virtue of allowing one to enlist Surrealism in the cause of radical feminism. Because Surrealism attacks our basic "fabrications of the real," the usual view of Surrealism as anti-feminist is, according to Professor Krauss, "mistaken." In a way, though, this is not a surprising conclusion. After all, if one can dispense with the law of identity, then it is no great feat to rehabilitate even such notorious male chauvinists as Breton and Man Ray as covert feminists.

Among the supporting events at the conference were an "Avant-Garde Art and Literature Book Fair," poetry readings (avant-garde poetry, of course: lots of poems about the hazards of nuclear war and so on), and —as the press release put it—two "major" art shows, which included a smorgasbord of minor works by Dali, Chagall, Max Ernst, Duchamp, and other certified "avant-garde" artists. (The mindless use of the term "major" by institutions wishing to publicize their wares has by now rendered it almost as meaningless as the term "avant-garde"—every exhibition, performance, or event is described as "major" nowadays, no matter how insignificant it is.) At the Book Fair, the writer Richard Kostelanetz gave a special address on "Grants, Alternative Publishing and the Avant-Garde." The Book Fair itself consisted essentially of a few titles from Oxford University Press and a motley assortment of small "avant-garde" publishing houses and presses. "Boss Books," for example, described itself as emphasizing "provocative materials, experimental in nature or controversial in implication," whereas "Mixed Breed" publishes mainstream fiction "for tomorrow's reader." The "Heresies Collective, Inc." is "a feminist Art and Politics Publication" and "Yellow Silk: Journal of Erotic Arts" is a quarterly that boasted of being "truly erotic without being pornographic." I was only surprised not to see any "Avant-Garde Art and Literature" tee shirts for sale, though perhaps they were available at a concession I missed.

I had to marvel at the intuition that led the conference co-directors, Dr. Lekatsas and Pellegrino D'Acierno, Assistant Professor of Italian at Hofstra, to begin their "Directors' Message"—printed in the conference program—with the headline *Ceci n'est pas une conference*: "This is not a conference." The tag, of course, recalls the famous Magritte painting, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. But it was doubly appropriate in a conference devoted to the avant-garde because Magritte's title has been enshrined by its appearance on the cover of a book by Michel Foucault, a patron saint of post-structuralism and kindred "avant-garde" enthusiasms.

More, or perhaps less, in any case decidedly something *other* than a mere conference, the proceedings at Hofstra, according to Drs. Lekatsas and D'Acierno, would attempt "to 'bring into crisis' the pedagogical with the artistic." This was not meant to be just another academic conference, but was to be an avant-garde event in its own right. It seemed somehow unsporting, then, when Dr. D'Acierno expressed his concern about finishing a paper on Marinetti that he was due to give in an hour or so: what a perfect opportunity to proceed in the spirit of the avant-garde with a bit of automatic writing, or least automatic speaking! Still, what with the "gala events, dining, dancing and dazzle," the co-directors were confident enough to write that the conference was "the type of encounter that André Breton and Marcel Duchamp would have enjoyed: a total event. Not a conference, but a feast of ideas and a celebration, something between a variety show and a Platonic symposium." As it happened, they were quite right about its likeness to a variety show; whether it bore any meaningful resemblance to a Platonic symposium, however, is another matter. If we are to judge by the quality of discourse, then

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I'm afraid that it had much more in common with Xenophon's *Symposium*—which, after all, is little more than a description of a voluble dinner party—than Plato's, though in truth even that comparison suggests a nobility and refinement quite absent from the events at Hofstra.

This absence of refinement was strikingly evident in the forum on "Avant-Garde Ideology and Practice in the Artist's Studio," in which several artists and the poet David Shapiro were to tell us what it was like to be a practicing avant-garde artist. The New York artist Vito Acconci spoke first. His contribution consisted of a narrated slide show of his works from 1969 to the present. Mr. Acconci began his career as a writer, he told us, but turned to art in the late Sixties when he realized that what he had always been primarily interested in was the physical activity of "moving across the page" and the exploration of "real space" that that involved. His first "works" as a visual artist consisted of picking people out arbitrarily and then following them around the real space of the city until they went into an office or private residence. I forget exactly which traditional assumptions about art this was supposed to liberate us from: by this time, two days into the conference, I was languishing in that slough of boredom that I trust will be familiar to anyone who has braved such events.

But I woke up when Mr. Acconci began describing *Seed Bed,* a work presented at the Sonnabend Gallery in SoHo in the early Seventies. *Seed Bed* consisted of an empty room in which there was placed a platform that sloped up several feet to the back wall, creating a false floor. The piece was "activated" throughout gallery hours, Mr. Acconci explained, when he would secrete himself underneath the platform and attempt to masturbate continuously, broadcasting his moans over loudspeakers to the gallery's patrons. While Mr. Acconci apparently felt that *Seed Bed* was an artistic success, he subsequently abandoned such works because he began to sense that they might be too narcissistic and lack social focus. That was, I thought, astute of him.

DeWitt Hardy

Annies Habit, watercolor
25⅝ x 21½ inches, 1984

Recent Watercolors

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Previously unacquainted with Mr. Acconci's work, I listened to his account of *Seed Bed* and other works with a mixture of bewilderment and incredulity. Naïvely, perhaps, I at first thought he must be kidding. It seemed too much like a vulgar parody of the avant-garde to be true. But then it dawned on me that not only Mr. Acconci's presentation, but the entire event was just that—a vulgar parody, a caricature of the avant-garde.

In itself, a conference on avant-garde art and literature at Hofstra University would hardly be worth noticing. But the sad truth is that such conferences—some of which, of course, are better than others—have become a staple of academic life. The place of the conference in contemporary academia was brilliantly satirized by the English writer David Lodge in his recent novel, *Small World*. Mr. Lodge is an accomplished literary critic as well as a novelist, and he has a discerning eye for the vagaries of academic life. "The modern conference," he writes, "resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austerely bent on self-improvement." He also notes that today's conferences have the additional advantage over the pilgrimages of old in that expenses are usually paid or at least heavily subsidized by the participants' institutions. Conferences thus afford one the opportunity to "eat, drink and make merry . . . every evening; and yet, at the end of it all, return home with an enhanced reputation for seriousness of mind."

Yet of course not all conferences are equal, and the one with which *Small World* opens, at a place called Rummidge—modeled conspicuously on the University of Birmingham, where Mr. Lodge teaches—seemed to provide the closest parallel to the affair at Hofstra:

> Dismay had already been plainly written on many faces when they assembled the previous evening for the traditional sherry reception. The conferees had, by that time, acquainted themselves with the accommodation provided in one of the University's halls of residence, a building hastily erected in 1969, at the height of the boom in higher education, and now, only ten years later, looking much the worse for wear.

But Mr. Lodge puts his most telling insight into the mouth of his character Morris Zapp. Having just finished giving an analysis of literature in which all interpretation is discounted as more or less subjective projection, Professor Zapp entertains questions from the floor. One character, obviously impatient with Zapp's post-structuralist rhetoric, asks what the point of discussing his paper is if, according to his own theory, they would not be discussing what he actually said but merely some subjective interpretation. "There is no point," replies Zapp. "Then what in God's name is the point of it all?"

> The point, of course [says Professor Zapp], is to uphold he institution of academic literary studies. We maintain our position in society by publicly performing a certain ritual, just like any other group of workers in the realm of discourse—lawyers, politicians, journalists. And it looks as if we have done our duty for today, shall we all adjourn for a drink?

Small World offers a devastatingly accurate portrayal of the *ethos* of the modern academic conference. What it doesn't dwell upon, however, are the institutional considerations that have helped make such conferences so familiar a fixture at colleges and universities throughout the Free World. For not only do the participants "return home with an enhanced reputation for seriousness of mind": the sponsoring institutions, too, partake of an enhanced reputation for seriousness, regardless of the intellectual merit of the activity in question. The Hofstra administration obviously knows this well.

In fact, Hofstra would seem to have become something of a specialist in giving conferences. According to an article an-

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nouncing the conference in *The New York Times,* it has sponsored thirty-six of them since 1976. Hofstra's president, James M. Shuart, is clearly very proud of such activity. In the remarks he delivered to welcome us all to the conference, he provided some edifying statistics about Hofstra's enormous growth—it now boasts over eleven thousand students and seven hundred faculty members—and revealed that in the last decade alone the university has sponsored conferences on figures as diverse as "Albert Einstein, Fyodor Dostoevski, José Ortega y Gasset, Johann Sebastian Bach . . . and I can go on and on. It's a wonderful array of topics and subject areas." What this wonderful array of topics and subject areas had to do with Hofstra's task of educating its students —most of whom, in truth, will never have heard of Ortega—wasn't specified. But President Shuart did note that Hofstra had become "an international scholarly conference center." The present conference, the largest to date, only confirmed this. And for President Shuart, it also confirmed Hofstra's keen interest in the arts. Drawing on what he described as the "amazing resource" of the Weingrow Collection, the conference on avant-garde art and literature was said to demonstrate that the arts were "part of the life blood of the university."

That, I think, is open to question. But there is no question that Hofstra went all out for its conference on avant-garde art and literature. Françoise Gilot, author of *Life with Picasso,* and herself a professional painter, was named "Honorary Chairperson of the Conference Committee" and was a ubiquitous, totemic presence at the conference. Mme Gilot has apparently had various dealings with Hofstra over the years, and the university was only too willing to exploit her association with Picasso in its attempt to endow the conference with the sheen of "advanced" culture. She also went a long way toward legitimating the conference's billing as "international," for, together with one Canadian and one Australian speaker, she apparently made up its entire international contingent.

No doubt Hofstra went to ambitious lengths with its conference on avant-garde art and literature partly because the conference coincided with its fiftieth anniversary in 1985. Hofstra—which is perhaps known to most New Yorkers, through its radio advertisements, as "The College that Teaches Success"—has been anything but shy about publicizing itself in recent years. And what better way to garner public notice in the academic world than by sponsoring an elaborate, three-day conference? The packet of materials distributed to participants in the conference included a "Special Commemorative Advertising Supplement" celebrating Hofstra's fiftieth anniversary as well as a glossy brochure emblazoned with the slogan, "They say, 'Quality shows' and it shows at Hofstra." The brochure then goes on to retail some revelatory facts about the university—the number of computer terminals and library books and faculty members it has, for example, and, under "Quality of Life," its proximity to the New York Jets football team.

While *Small World* probably remains the most incisive literary parallel for the conference at Hofstra, the mixture of pretension and provinciality brought to mind a somewhat more remote literary comparison—I mean Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief.* That novel, the reader will recall, tells the story of Seth, the young African emperor who attended Oxford between the wars. His eyes opened, Seth returned to his tiny island empire determined to bring the wonders of modern industrial culture to his still essentially tribal population. Among other things, Seth tries with hilarious but pathetic earnestness to replicate the protocol of a European court, organizing elaborate feasts and ceremonies that never come off as planned. For example, when two English ladies, staunch vegetarians, come crusading against cruelty to animals, Seth provides an imperial banquet to welcome them. Unfortunately, he has mistaken their cause, thinking them proselytizers on behalf of cruelty *to* animals. The menu is thus addressed to "The English Cruelty to Animals," and includes several

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varieties of roasted meats for his guests' gustatory delectation.

As the novel opens, Seth is embroiled in a fierce civil war against his father, Seyid. The war is not going well for Seth; the enemy is rumored to be at the outskirts of the capital; desertion is rife. He is apprised of the situation, but proclaims grandly,

> "Fools, what do they know? What can they understand? I am Seth, grandson of Amurath. Defeat is impossible. I have been to Europe. I know. We have the Tank. This is not a war of Seth against Seyid but of Progress against Barbarism. And Progress must prevail. I have seen the great tattoo of Aldershot, the Paris Exhibition, the Oxford Union . . . ."

Seth had the Tank. Hofstra has the Conference. Looking back on the avant-garde conference, I think particularly of what Dr. D'Acierno described to me as the various "nocturnal events" associated with the conference, such as the "SALSA! OYE!" reception and dance that concluded the affair. I had to miss the "nocturnal events," alas, but the one I most lamented missing, and the one whose description reminded me most of *Black Mischief,* was the "Gala Avant-Garde Evening" on Friday, November 15, which included "A Surrealist Buffet and Cocktails," a preview of art exhibitions, a production of Picasso's absurdist play "Catch Desire by the Tail" by the Ubu Repertory Theater, and a "Gala After-Theater Supper." The program for the conference explained that the festivity was under the patronage of "H. E. The Ambassador of France and Mrs. Emmanuel de Margerie, The Consul General of France and Mrs. André Gadaud, H. E. The Ambassador to the United Nations and Mrs. Claude de Kemoularia," and so on. What precisely does this effort at "society" have to do with the study of avant-garde art and literature? Nothing, of course, but together with the rest of the conference it does perhaps succeed in a small way in achieving the directors' ambition to embody the avant-garde in their conference; the effect, at any rate, can justly be described as surrealistic.

The cover of the program for the conference thanks the National Endowment for the Humanities for funds that have supported Hofstra's Cultural Center, under whose auspices the conference was run. According to the notice, monies from the NEH have for some time enabled Hofstra "to increase humanities activities on campus for the benefit of the community, students, and faculty." Presumably, the present conference was such an activity, and one was naturally led to ponder what benefits it might have afforded. It did give the humanities faculty at Hofstra something to do, and perhaps that should be counted a benefit. But that it offered very little to the community seems clear, since one suspects that the population of Hempstead, New York, has no particular interest in the intricacies of avant-garde art and literature, especially as filtered through the obscure jargon of an academic conference. And what it meant to Hofstra's students was revealed with some poignancy in a forum on "Greek Surrealism," at which Dr. Lekatsas and the Greek poet Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke spoke. As the session started, a small group of students filed into the row of seats behind me, joining a handful of their fellows who had arrived early. One of the newcomers asked the woman next to him what the session was about. "Oh, Greek culture, or something, I think," she said doubtfully, and continued doodling. I hope she wasn't confusing it with the culture of Periclean Athens.

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Letters

Lanzmann's "Shoah"

To the Editors:

In what is an otherwise commendable article on Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah,* Ewa Kuryluk has several errors. Two are minor, one is serious. The minor errors: the fact that it was shown for the first time at the New York Film Festival in October. It should be noted that the film was *turned down* by the New York Film Festival and that it had its American premiere at the Cinema Studio on Broadway and 66th Street. Also, Ms. Kuryluk refers to a Ner River when in fact it is the Narew River.

More seriously, however, is the sentence that begins: "Not a professional film director but a medical doctor, Lanzmann . . ." etc. Where on earth Ms. Kuryluk divined that Lanzmann is a medical doctor and not a professional film director is a total mystery to me. It's this kind of misinformation that drives film distributors like myself crazy in the middle of the night, thinking of muddled pressbooks or of a publicity representative who gives the wrong information. I don't want to blow this up into a big issue, but for the reader to think that Lanzmann is a medical doctor (in fact, he is a Doctor of Philosophy) puts an entirely different complexion on the maker and the film. Is he a surgeon? A foot doctor? Did he interrupt his practice to make the film? In other words, is he a tourist playing at Art?

Lanzmann is indeed a filmmaker. Prior to making a 3-hour documentary, *Pourquoi Israel* (which was, by the way, shown at the New York Film Festival in 1974), he made several TV documentaries. Among other things, he was a member of the Sartre circle and has been an editor of *Les Temps Modernes* for over twenty years.

To say that he is a medical doctor implies that he wandered accidentally into the making of *Shoah.* The notion alters completely the viewer's perception of Lanzmann—the point is, he is a great artist who spent eleven years consciously making a great work of art.

Daniel Talbot
New Yorker Films
New York City

Ewa Kuryluk replies:

Mr. Talbot points out three mistakes he found in my article on *Shoah.*

1. *Ner* instead of *Narew* river. I am aware of the fact that the Polish name of the river is "Narew." However, I wrote my essay in Paris and checked the names in the French edition of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (Fayard, Paris: 1985), where the name of the river is given as "Ner" (p. 15). I assumed that in the West the river is known under this name and adopted it in order to be consistent with the book.

2. Mr. Talbot is right. *Shoah* was not shown at the New York Film Festival but was released, approximately at the same time, at the Cinema Studio on Broadway and 66th Street. I relied on wrong information that was transmitted to me when I was still in Paris.

3. Mr. Talbot is right, Lanzmann is not a medical doctor. This mistake on my part was not

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caused by a muddled press release but by an inaccurate remembrance of Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs where Lanzmann appears in connection with Sartre's illness. Why did I not check this information? Because it seemed correct to me, although for different reasons than those attributed to me by Mr. Talbot. I value nothing more than artistic independence which, all too often, can be only achieved when an artist supports his work by doing other jobs. Lanzmann is not a man of the commercial film establishment, and the most precious quality of his film lies precisely in his not complying with any iconographical or formal trends. It was the uniqueness of *Shoah* that made me incorrectly assume that he belonged to the European tradition of such doctors as Anton Chekhov or Arthur Schnitzler to name but two.

I am grateful to Mr. Talbot for pointing out this error. But I would have preferred if he had done it in a matter-of-fact way, without insinuating things for which there is no basis in my text. There is not one word suggesting that I consider Claude Lanzmann "a tourist playing at Art." Although I am critical of the omission of certain issues, I say explicitly, and not once but twice (p. 16 and p. 20), that his film represents a great artistic achievement, that it "stands out not only as a unique document for future generations but as a work of art concerned with memory, language, and responsibility." I apologize to Mr. Lanzmann but dismiss Mr. Talbot's accusation of having misrepresented *Shoah*.

The "language poets"

To the Editors:

The idea of dismissing the literary activity of a whole city would seem absurd, but this is apparently Stephen Schwartz's approach to San Francisco ("Escapees in Paradise," December, 1985). Nor does he mean to be ironic when he remarks, "Like all good poets, [Philip Lamantia] has turned to nature for his subject"; evidently Mr. Schwartz is not conversant with the English literary tradition.

My purpose here is not to debate taste in poetry; those who have read Shklovsky or Neruda or Ferlinghetti will not linger too long over Mr. Schwartz's prose. But I do want to respond to some specific misrepresentation. Mr. Schwartz implies that George Lakoff, a professor of linguistics at the University of California, who he says "originally mainly concerned himself with topics derived from mathematical logic," is not qualified to speak authoritatively about contemporary poetics and poetry. What Mr. Schwartz fails to mention is that Professor Lakoff is best known for co-authoring *Metaphors We Live By,* a book relevant to, and influenced by, contemporary poetry, and that he has spent most of his professional life working for a greater interaction between poetics and linguistics. There are few linguists more qualified to comment on the linguistic grounds of a work of poetics, which, in the instance cited by Mr. Schwartz, is what Professor Lakoff was doing.

Mr. Schwartz writes that Professor Lakoff was "enlisted" (his word for *chose*) to defend Barrett Watten after Tom Clark "sent a few humorous shafts in Watten's direction." It should be noted that Mr. Clark has attacked Mr. Watten in an ill-spirited way a number of times and in several publications over the past few years; Mr. Schwartz's criticisms of Mr. Watten are eerily similar to Mr. Clark's.

Mr. Schwartz quotes two stanzas from Mr. Watten's remarkable book-length poem, *Progress* (published by New York's *Roof* Books, not "Ruth" Books as you have it), citing the last phrase—"Stalin as linguist . . ."—as a "callously neutral reference to Stalin, the notorious murderer of poets." This comment is grotesque. Readers are given no indication of how this sentence fragment, which is followed by ellipsis points, is used in the context of the poem since he cuts the quote here: Does *Progress* continue to refer to Stalin in the next line? Does it make a difference that the phrase is "Stalin *as* linguist" and not, as Mr. Schwartz takes it, "Stalin *is* a linguist"? These points seem to elude the author, who embarks on a series of mad free associations on a sentence fragment taken out of context—at one point he even refers to the "murderer of Grenadian school children"—that bear no relation to the poem being discussed. This would seem to be a parody of postmodernist pastiche, but evidently not. Mr. Schwartz is apparently unaware of literary devices, or that a poem needs to be read aesthetically rather than,

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or in addition to, statementally. Irony, hyperbole, understatement parataxis, and ambiguity are just a few of the possibilities that a reader familiar with twentieth-century poetry would consider, confronted with Mr. Watten's line (or, for that matter, Mr. Schwartz's method of argument). Even a reader unfamiliar with poetry would notice something unusual is happening in *Progress* since a central device in the work is the formally patterned use of historical names in phrases that *cannot* be taken at face value: "Eisenhower / Did not come to power," "I meet Trotsky," etc.

Mr. Schwartz's comment that *Progress* is "probably the most representative example" of "language poetry" erodes any confidence that he has read much in the area. "Language writing" is a term applied to a range of related, though often contradictory, tendencies. No one poem can represent the variety to be found in the scores of books by dozens of poets which together would begin to constitute this field. Mr. Schwartz excepts from his censure "one of their number"—Lyn Hejinian. But why, one wonders, is one of her unnamed and unquoted works not as representative of "language poetry" as *Progress*? It is important to note that Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten are co-editors of the widely respected periodical *Poetics Journal*. Certainly, the work of these two gifted poets is very different—but that is just the point.

Finally, Mr. Schwartz asserts that the "Watten-Lakoff alliance"—by which he means various unrelated individuals who disagree with his position—have characterized "their critics" as being rightists, and that they fail to appreciate the consequences of such labelling in Communist societies. Unfortunately, Mr. Schwartz makes these comments in the course of red-baiting his targets, less ignoring than testing the consequences of such labelling in our society. It should be noted that "language poetry" has been attacked from the "common sense" right and from the "populist" left for questioning mimetic and discursive conventions. Mr. Schwartz finds himself in an odd—well perhaps not that odd—alliance; poetry appears to be the victim.

Charles Bernstein
Coeditor, *L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E*
New York City

Stephen Schwartz replies:

The problem with Professor Lakoff is not that he is untalented in the discussion of what a metaphor is; I never suggested such a thing. Rather, it is that knowing what a metaphor is in a mechanical way, and producing a good poem, or even knowing what makes a good poem stand out from the masses of metaphors, are very different matters. Lakoff injected himself into the debate between Tom Clark and Barrett Watten in an attempt to shore up Watten's standing as a poet. Had the works of Watten been presented as linguistic research, I doubt Clark would have even reviewed them. But ultimately, all such theories are used by the Wattens of the world to sustain their reputations as poets, not as abstract thinkers. In the creative arena Lakoff has meager standing—compared with a serious poet like Clark—to decide whether "language poetry" is good.

As to the problem of Watten's reference to "Stalin as linguist" (quoted correctly in my piece): this offers, in some respects, a specific example of what is wrong with the Lakoff-Watten approach to poetry. The issue is not what kind of rhetorical figures Watten utilizes in dealing with Stalin; rather it is that he has chosen to treat Stalin in a *morally neutral* manner. This was the point of my criticism, and I will repeat it. I know very well what irony and all the other literary devices cited by Mr. Bernstein consist of. The sad truth, however, is that the linguistically fractured character of Watten's verse makes it virtually impossible to tell when he is indeed being ironical. But is not even this kind of irony, if that is what it is, when referring to a Stalin, rather morally reprehensible? How would one take, for example, a long poem beginning with a reference to "Hitler as an art critic . . ."? It seems to me, to put it frankly, that the linguistic manipulations of Watten, no matter how high-flown the analytical terminology with which they are described, exist in reality to make a morally neutral view of Stalin acceptable. It is precisely because Watten chooses to deal with Stalin, by name, *without* further elaboration, in the middle of his verbal stew, that I believe he must be criticized. It seems to me that a primary concern of the "language poets" is to create a kind of text in which any interpretation can be assigned, in conformity with the

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political needs of the author at any given moment.

I chose Watten as more representative of "language poetry" than the clearly more gifted Lyn Hejinian mainly because Hejinian's work shows a somewhat greater sensitivity and depth, and because it lacks the incredible pomposity of the rest. This makes Hejinian an exception, rather than an appropriate choice for "most representative" of the genre.

Finally, on the matter of "red-baiting" vs. "Reagan-baiting": The "language poets" and many of their defenders wear their politics "on their sleeves," and must expect to answer for it. I, too, wear my politics publicly, and am fully prepared to pay the price. What I object to is not the free exchange of opinions, however harsh that might prove, but the arbitrary assignment of political labels to those who have not taken public political positions. To my knowledge, I am the only one of Watten's critics who can be remotely called a "Reaganite." Certainly, the poet Tom Clark cannot. And yet it was Clark, among others, who first suffered the attachment of this preposterous label—not because of his politics, but simply because he had criticized Watten. That is the kind of labelling that must be fought, no matter who carries it out.

While I am at it, I would like to mention that a reader has called attention to my use of the word "Jesuitical" in my discussion of San Francisco intellectual life. Although I intended no religious reference, the term was indeed ill chosen, and the editors and I regret its use.

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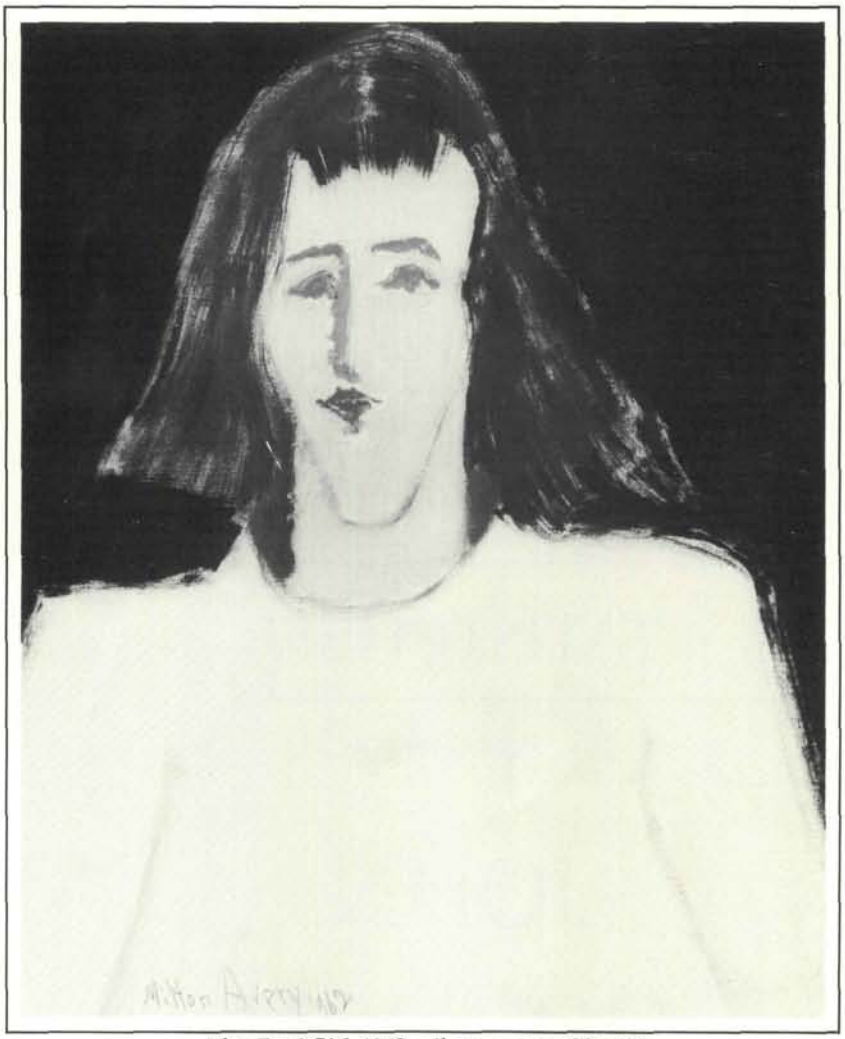

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